

# Sleep Hacks 101: How to Boost Your Dog's Nighttime Bliss

Disrupted sleep in dogs can be just as challenging for owners as it is for pets. Fortunately, by following these simple tips, sleep problems can usually be successfully resolved.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Sleep troubles are common in older dogs and can be a sign of underlying illness
- If your older pup is waking up a lot at night, the first step is a trip to the veterinarian to rule out health conditions like canine cognitive dysfunction syndrome
- Everything from noise sensitivity and sensory changes to respiratory issues and phobias could be disturbing your dog's sleep-wake cycle
- You can help reduce anxiety at night by maintaining a regular routine for meals, walks and bedtime/wake time, along with a calm environment; some dogs also sleep sounder if they're allowed in their owner's bedroom
- Plenty of mental and physical stimulation during the day will help your dog sleep at night, as will a soft, dark, quiet spot to cozy up in at night

Dogs typically sleep for about 12 to 14 hours of a 24-hour period, though not usually in one long stretch. While it's common for dogs to wake up during the night multiple times — one study found that dogs averaged 23 sleep-wake episodes, with the average sleep-wake cycle consisting of 16 minutes asleep followed by five minutes awake<sup>1</sup> — sleep troubles are common in older dogs and can be a sign of an underlying illness.

If your older pup is waking up a lot at night, the first step is a trip to the veterinarian to rule out health conditions. Everything from noise sensitivity and sensory changes to respiratory issues and phobias could be disturbing your dog's sleep-wake cycle.<sup>2</sup> It could even be that your dog needs to use the bathroom more often. It could be a sign of dementia, also known as **canine cognitive dysfunction syndrome** (CCDS).

## Dogs With Dementia Often Have Disrupted Sleep

Sleep-wake cycle changes, including sleeping more during the day or difficulty sleeping at night, are often among the earliest signs of CCDS. In one study, researchers found that dogs with higher dementia scores and worse performance on a problem-solving task spent less time in NREM and REM sleep.<sup>3</sup>

Professor Natasha Olby, senior author the study, added in The Guardian, "Changes in sleep habits should be expected in older dogs, and could be a harbinger of decline in cognition."<sup>4</sup> If CCDS is the problem, you can help reduce anxiety at night by maintaining a regular routine for meals, walks and bedtime/wake time, along with a calm environment. Some dogs also sleep sounder if they're allowed in their owner's bedroom.

Nutraceutical support can also be beneficial for dogs with CCDS. I recommend 1/4 teaspoon of coconut oil for every 10 pounds of body weight, added daily to food, along with a source of methyl donors, such as SAME (S-adenosylmethionine), which can assist in detoxification and reduce inflammation. Other supplements to consider include:

- Jellyfish extracts
- Glutathione
- Resveratrol
- Ginkgo biloba
- Phosphatidylserine
- Huperzine A
- Pterostilbene
- Pyrroloquinoline quinone (PQQ)
- Omega-3 fats such as sustainably sourced krill oil

## Mental and Physical Stimulation to Help Your Dog Sleep at Night

Getting enough activity during the day is paramount to sound sleep at night, including for senior dogs. Older dogs can swim, go for walks and take part in **exercises to maintain strength**, flexibility and balance. Appropriate mental stimulation — beyond that provided by physical exercise — is also necessary for optimal brain health.

Food puzzles and treat-release toys are two examples to keep your dog's mind working during the day, but you can also engage them in **nose work** or training to learn a new skill. Socialization with animals and people is also important and should be a regular part of your dog's senior life — just take care to not overstimulate your pup right before bedtime. A vigorous play session in the late afternoon or early evening may help your dog settle down when it's time for bed.

Keep in mind that if your dog does wake up at night, you shouldn't scold him. "Human responses should not increase distress or reinforce unwanted behaviors. Owners should ignore unwanted behaviors when possible and understand that harsh reprimands can increase anxiety," according to Dr. Julia Albright with the University of Tennessee in Clinician's Brief.<sup>5</sup>

## Setting Up Your Dog's Sleep Environment

You probably have a nighttime routine to help you wind down and fall asleep. A similar routine may also be supportive of sleep for your pet. All dogs, but especially older dogs, need a warm, soft place to sleep at night.

An environment conducive to sleep in dogs is very similar to your own — choose a quiet, dark spot without a lot of activity going on. Some dogs also enjoy calming music. A **before-bed massage** can also set the stage for a restful slumber. Many dogs also enjoy **sleeping near their owners**.

“Basic guidelines should include establishing a predictable nighttime routine and designating a specific resting area with low sensory stimulation,” Albright writes. “Darkness is generally ideal, but some dogs may prefer light (e.g., night-light). Window film, blackout shades, and/or a white noise machine can help reduce external stimuli. Pheromonotherapy and aromatherapy can contribute to relaxation.”<sup>6</sup>

## Supplements to Support Sound Sleep

If your older dog is in pain, be sure to offer **appropriate pain relief**. This alone may help your pup settle down at night and is non-negotiable for peaceful rest. If anxiety is an issue, calming nutraceuticals and herbs such as holy basil, l-theanine, rhodiola, ashwagandha, bacopa, GABA, 5-HTP and chamomile may be beneficial.

The essential oil of lavender has also been proven to reduce the stress response in dogs. Place a few drops on your pet's collar or bedding at night or diffuse the oil around your house. There are also great oil blends specifically for calming animals. Melatonin for pets is another option to support sleep:<sup>7</sup>

*“Dietary supplements, some of which may be beneficial when administered several hours before nighttime, are often administered to geriatric patients due to low risk for adverse effects when given alone or in conjunction with prescription medications. Melatonin, for example, is a naturally secreted hormone and popular sleep aid with a mechanism of action that may allow the patient to fall asleep more quickly.”*

Disrupted sleep in older dogs can be just as challenging for owners as it is for pets. Fortunately, by supporting your dog's cognitive function and making changes to their environment and behaviors — including plenty of mental and physical stimulation during the day — sleep problems can usually be successfully resolved.

## Sources and References

<sup>1</sup> [Applied Animal Behaviour Science Volume 36, Issues 2–3, April 1993, Pages 233-248](#)

<sup>2,5,6,7</sup> [Clinician's Brief, July 2022](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Front. Vet. Sci., 28 April 2023](#)

<sup>4</sup> [The Guardian, April 28, 2023](#)

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