

Our dog sleeps in bed with us, generally at the foot of the bed. Why does she have a nightly ritual of scratching at the blanket and circling several times before she lies down to sleep?

Various surveys have been taken of pet owners and how they interact with their dogs. A recent publication reports that as many as 56% of dog owners allow their dogs to sleep in bed with them, so you are in the majority. There are potential negative aspects of having a dog sleep in bed with you, related to aggravation of allergies, disturbing your sleep, and spread of parasites, but that is the subject of another column.

Canine behaviorists have several theories for the scratching the bed and circling rituals you describe. One commonly held belief is this is a hard-wired instinctive behavior that is also seen in wolves. Years ago when dogs slept outdoors in the woods or a field, they had to trample an area to make a comfortable spot to sleep. This flattened out area of the grass and underbrush also served as a visual sign to other dogs that that spot was taken and as a warning to stay out of the territory. Other dogs could also smell the scent left behind from glands in the paw pads released during the scratching and circling and know the area was off limits. In addition, if the weather was hot, the top surface of the ground might have been very warm, so scratching up the surface would bring cooler, more comfortable soil to the top to sleep on. In our indoor dogs, they are generally just going through the motions of their ancestors' age-old habits.

The scratching and circling might have developed as a way to rid the sleeping area of insects, snakes and other pests. Circling also provides an opportunity to see and smell what is going on in every direction to assure the location is a safe spot for the night.

This is an example of a normal canine behavior that generally doesn't cause any harm and shouldn't be corrected. In the case of a dog that is a little too rough with his scratching of the bed linens or carpet, try covering the area with a throw rug that he can scratch and conform to his liking without damaging what is under it. Of course, you can always try a dog bed with a loose, cushy filling that he may like just as well.

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