

# **Dog Bites**

**By Michelle Posage, DVM**



The statistics on dog bites are rather daunting. Dog bites requiring medical attention in the United States are 500,000 to one million annually. More than half of these bites involve children. Even so, many bites go unreported. There are over a dozen human fatalities from dog bites every year. Home owner insurance companies pay out million of dollars each year for dog bite claims and some companies will not insure home owners who have certain breeds of dogs. In a retrospective study of breeds of dogs involved in fatal human attacks in the U.S. from 1979-1998, it was found that at least 25 breeds of dogs were involved in 238 fatal attacks. The majority of the attacks involved unrestrained dogs either on or off of the owner's property. Although there appears to be a relationship between certain breeds of dogs and attacks on humans, it is important to realize that any breed of dog can bite and that responsible pet ownership is the key to reducing the likelihood of a dog bite incident.

The American Veterinary Medical Association has teamed up with the American Society of Plastic Surgeons to educate the public on the prevention of dog bites. Their recommendations are as follows:

## **DOG OWNERS:**

- Before getting a dog, carefully select the breed that will compliment your lifestyle. Ask your veterinarian for advice on selecting a breed.
- Be sure to socialize your dog to other people and animals.
- Do not put your dog in a situation where it will feel threatened or may be teased.
- Follow leash laws and do not let your dog roam freely.
- Be sure your dog understands basic obedience and responds to sit, stay, and come.
- Maintain the health of your dog with regular veterinary visits and vaccinations, including rabies vaccination.
- A dog that is ill or in pain is more apt to bite.
- Never play aggressive games with your dog.
- Spay or neuter your dog.
- Confine your dog to a fenced yard or dog run. Do not chain or tether your dog as this can add to aggression.

## **SAFETY TIPS FOR APPROACHING DOGS:**

- Never approach an unfamiliar dog.
- If approached by an unfamiliar dog, stand still. Never run from a dog or scream.
- If you think a dog is going to attack you, try to place something between yourself and the dog, like a bike or backpack.
- If a dog knocks you over, curl into a ball with your hands over the back of your neck.
- Never allow children to play with a dog unsupervised.
- Children should tell an adult if they see a stray dog or a dog acting strangely.
- Do not look a dog in the eye.
- Do not disturb a dog that is sleeping, eating, or caring for puppies.
- Do not play with a dog without allowing it to sniff you first. Children should never approach a dog without the supervision of an adult.
- Adults should never leave an infant or small child alone with a dog, even a family pet.

**IF A DOG BITE OCCURS:**

- Seek medical attention immediately. Children are often bitten on the face, which can lead to severe lacerations, infection, and scarring. Plastic surgery is often necessary to repair the wounds.
- Control bleeding by applying pressure.
- Wash the area with soap and water.
- Report the bite to local police. Provide an accurate description of the dog, the circumstances surrounding the bite incident, and the owner's identity, if known.

Millions of Americans choose to own dogs. Dogs add devotion and companionship to our lives. Even so, it is important to realize that any dog is capable of biting. For everyone's safety, it is our obligation to avoid a bite incident through responsible dog ownership.

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