

## The Facts About Dog Bites

There is a concern that certain breeds represent a greater danger to human health than others and there are many reasons to carefully consider what would be the best pet for any given family. However, the answers to the questions about dog bites may not be as obvious as they may appear.

Each year almost 5 million people are bitten by dogs and almost a fifth require some kind of medical care. Tragically, up to 20 fatalities are recorded. The Centers for Disease Control has labeled dog bites as an epidemic, and some communities have banned ownership of certain breeds.

It would be easy to assume that dobermans, pit bulls and rottweilers would be on the top of the list, however, studies do not support this theory. In fact, any dog can be aggressive depending on his training and environment. The pet owner has a very important responsibility to take steps to ensure that a pet does not represent a risk to public or family safety.

The following are steps a pet owner should consider taking to ensure that a dog does not represent a threat to children and people who come in contact with them:

1. Socialize your new puppy. They are most open to new learning between the ages of 8 to 12 weeks. This is the time to take him to public places and to start puppy classes. Make sure he only comes in contact with other pets who are vaccinated.
2. Restrain your dog. Pets that are not leashed represent the great majority of fatal bites. There are certain environments in which unrestrained exercise is acceptable, but always be aware that a greater risk is involved in unsupervised activities.
3. Spay or neuter pets that are not going to be bred. When dogs are spayed or neutered they lose some of their territorial instincts and a greater degree of their territorial aggression. Studies have shown that 80 percent of fatal bites were caused by intact dogs.
4. The correct response to biting. Most puppies have a natural instinct to chew and bite objects and even hands when undisciplined. Make sure to teach them that this is inappropriate behavior by alerting them with a sharp sound immediately when it happens. Always reward good behavior and redirect their attention to toys or other objects which represent appropriate choices for chewing and biting.
5. Be mindful of behavioral changes and seek professional advice if required.

There is no substitute for careful observation. In my experience, I do see variations in behavior among pets of different breeds and ages. The increased risk of biting can be modified by taking the correct steps at the right time. If you own a dog with a known genetic history of biting, you must train and restrain him properly. The same is true for pets as they age. An older pet suffering from arthritis or gum disease can become cranky and sometimes age brings about cognitive disfunction which might result in biting.

If you see signs that your pet is suffering behavior changes which represent a risk to other pets or people, seek the advice of your veterinarian. There are occasions when underlying medical disorders may cause behavioral changes. Blood tests can rule these out.

There are occasions when pets need to be referred to a veterinary behavioral specialist. *This is especially important if any threat to human health is noted.* There are certain drugs and behavior modification techniques which can be employed to assist a pet overcome separation anxiety and aggression.

The pet owner who is irresponsible represents a greater danger than a pet of any breed. If a pet is trained properly and restrained correctly it should not represent a threat and will provide parents and owners with a great degree of pleasure and the satisfaction of knowing that responsible ownership leads to the security of a safe environment.