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DOG BITES— ARE THERE DANGEROUS BREEDS?

Dog bites are a serious problem in the United States. Each year, an estimated 4.7 million people are bitten by dogs, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Around 17 percent of these people require medical care. And in approximately 10-20 tragic cases per year, the bite victim is killed. The CDC has labeled dog bites in America an "epidemic."

In response to this growing problem, some communities have banned ownership of certain dogs that are perceived as dangerous, particularly pit bulls and rottweilers. Are some breeds really more dangerous than others?

Breed characteristics

It's difficult to determine just how much a dog's genetics determine his behavior, just like it's hard to know how much of a person's personality is nature and how much is nurture. It's true that some breeds simply have more ability to injure people than others do. Though it's no more likely to bite than a smaller dog, if it does bite, a Great Dane can do much more damage than a Maltese, for example. (Even very small breeds can be dangerous to children, however.)

A study performed by the American Veterinary Medical Association, the CDC, and the Humane Society of the United States, analyzed dog bite statistics from the last 20 years and found that the statistics don't show that any breeds are inherently more dangerous than others. The study showed that the most popular large breed dogs at any one time were consistently on the list of breeds that bit fatally. There were a high number of fatal bites from Doberman pinschers in the 1970s, for example, because Dobermans were very popular at that time and there were more Dobermans around, and because Dobermans' size makes their bites more dangerous. The number of fatal bites from pit bulls rose in the 1980s for the same reason, and the number of bites from rottweilers in the 1990s. The study also noted that there are no reliable statistics for nonfatal dog bites, so there is no way to know how often smaller breeds are biting.

Owner responsibilities

This study supports what many veterinarians have believed for years: nearly any dog can be aggressive or nonaggressive, depending on his training and environment. Owners play a big part in making sure that their pet is safe around other people. There are several steps you can take to help ensure that your dog isn't dangerous.

- **Restrain your pet.** Unrestrained dogs cause about 82 percent of all fatal bites. Keeping your dog on a strong leash whenever you're in public is a big first step toward preventing bites. Strangers and a strange environment may startle your pet. Extra precautions should be taken to make ensure your pet is at ease. If you leave your dog alone outdoors, your yard needs to be enclosed with a six- to eight-foot fence, depending on your dog's size.



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- **Socialize your puppy.** Puppies are more open to learning between the age of 8 and 12 weeks. This is the opportune time to start puppy classes and begin socialization with other pets. It is important to introduce the puppy to animals with a known vaccination history. Talk to your veterinarian about the proper time to take your canine friend to puppy classes, the park and the pet store. Socialize your puppy by taking him anywhere where he can interact with people and other dogs in a nonthreatening environment. Be sure to praise him when he interacts well with others.
- **Spay or neuter your dog.** Intact (non-neutered) male dogs are responsible for approximately 80 percent of fatal bites. When dogs are altered, they lose some of their territorial instincts, including a lot of their territorial aggression.
- **Train him not to bite.** Dogs will mouth, chew and bite everything from your hands to your furniture until you teach them that it's inappropriate. If your dog is biting or growling at you or other family members, distract him with a quick sound, such as a clap or a sharp "ouch!" Then redirect his attention to a chew toy. Remember, timing is everything. Make sure your noise is heard at the exact moment the dog is biting. The dog will not understand what is going on if the noise occurs after the bite (they cannot make that connection). Also be sure to reward him when you catch him chewing on the right things.
- **Watch your dog's behavior.** This may be the most important part of preventing your dog from biting. It's easy for owners to be in denial that their sweet, furry Fido may be a threat. But if your dog exhibits any of the following behaviors, it's time for your veterinarian's help: growling at, snapping at, or biting family members; growling or snapping at strangers; or extreme fear of strangers.

If you see signs that your dog could be aggressive or dangerous, you can ask your veterinarian to refer you to a veterinary behavioral specialist. While your dog is being treated for aggression, be careful with him in public. Be sure to warn strangers to use caution if they interact with him. It may be important to wear a basket muzzle while out in public until the aggression is managed properly. A gentle leader may also be very helpful in controlling your pet when out in public.

Following these directions won't guarantee that your dog won't bite, but they'll certainly make it less likely. Any dog that is well restrained and well trained can be perfectly safe, regardless of breed. The truth is, an irresponsible owner is much more dangerous than any dog.

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