



Milton Animal Hospital

Dog bites—Are there dangerous breeds?

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Dog bites are a serious problem in the United States. Each year, 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."

The ten breeds involved in the most lethal attacks over the past ten years are pit bulls, rottweilers, German shepherds, huskies, malamutes, Dobermans, chow chows, St. Bernards, Great Danes, and Akitas.

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 were bred to perform tasks that require more aggression than others. Pit bulls, for example, were bred to fight dogs and other animals for sport. Some people theorize that pit bulls' genetics make them more prone to violence than other dogs, and pit bulls have in fact been involved in more fatal attacks than any other dog over the past 20 years. But breeds that are not bred for aggression, including golden retrievers, cocker spaniels, and Yorkshire terriers, have been involved in fatal attacks as well.

It's also 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. Also, don't encourage strangers to interact with your dog; strangers and a strange environment may startle him. 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.
- *Socialize your puppy.* Once your pup has been fully vaccinated and he has your veterinarian's okay, take him to puppy classes, the park, and the pet store. Take him anywhere where he can interact with people and other dogs in a nonthreatening environment. 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 you, or growling at you or other family members, distract him with a quick sound, such as a clap or a sharp "ow!" Then redirect his attention to a rawhide or chew toy. And 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.

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.