



Dog Bite Prevention: Recognizing Risky Situations

You never know when you might encounter a risky situation with a dog, regardless of whether that dog is known or unknown to you. It's important to know how to avoid escalating risky situations and to understand when you should and should not interact with dogs.

Like most accidents, dog bites tend to happen in the home or neighborhood. One common mistake people make is they believe that dogs they've seen or interacted with before will always interact with them in the same way, and that simply isn't true. Any number of things could cause the dog to act out, even if there haven't been any prior problems with that dog. You can reduce the risk of dog bite injuries, and the most important thing is to never think any dog is completely safe. In a situation where a dog is acting fearful or aggressive, don't provoke the dog. Disengage and move away when any dog behaves aggressively. Don't make any sudden movements or loud or high-pitched sounds because these may activate the dog's predator instinct and escalate its behavior. Move away slowly, confidently, and calmly, and break eye contact with the dog.

When you go to someone's house or to the park, it's easy to make mistakes and not recognize risk or the signs of a growing problem. People assume all dogs are nice, or assume because a dog is friendly with someone else, it is safe for them to approach and touch. Also, just because you've had a positive interaction with a dog before doesn't mean it's guaranteed to happen that way again. Remain alert to risks in dogs, even those you think you know.

Aside from being smart about interacting with dogs you think you know, avoid long interactions with dogs that aren't completely familiar to you and be careful about approaching them. Be mindful of your surroundings, the dog's behavior and anything that might make the dog feel threatened, challenged or cornered. Be aware that signs like a yellow ribbon or orange bandanna may indicate a dog that should not be approached. Even if you think a dog will tolerate something -- like petting, for example -- don't do it without asking the owner for permission first. For example, the dog might appear normal but have a painful health condition that could cause the dog to fear being touched or cause it to bite if touched in certain areas.

The more uncomfortable you make a dog, the closer you get to the risk zone. The easiest way to avoid this "risk zone" is not to startle or bother the dog. When meeting a dog offer the back of your hand and see whether it is comfortable approaching and sniffing. Interactions initiated by the dog may be safer because the dog is coming to you and wants to interact, but these situations are not completely free of risk depending on the mood and intent of the dog, so be guided by the owner who knows their dogs the best. Take an ambivalent response by the owner as a "no" as some owners may be reluctant to admit their dog can be aggressive. Always make sure to ask if it's all right for you to play with the dog. And even if the dog initiates the contact, avoid doing things that may trigger predatory instincts or aggression, such as prolonged eye contact, quick or jerky movements, and high-pitched or loud sounds. Remain mindful and disengage if the dog or owner seems to become uncomfortable with the situation.

Sometimes in a park or on the street, you could be confronted with a dog that's off-leash. Move away calmly and slowly if you encounter a dog that is not on a leash. If the dog is displaying aggressive behaviors, contact authorities immediately and report the dog's location and appearance. Avoid engaging with the dog, and caution others (particularly children) to remain calm and avoid engaging with the dog.

If you're a dog owner, buy a leash that is sturdy and easy to see. Teach your dog to sit quietly when patted, or politely refuse requests if your dog is uncomfortable with or does not behave appropriately when being petted by strangers. Take responsibility for keeping your dog from approaching people unless they invite the interaction. Whenever possible avoid making pedestrians walk through an area where your dog could easily approach them due to a long or lax leash. You may know your dog is good natured, but they do not and could be made to feel uncomfortable about having dogs around them in the community. For this reason it may be wise to not use retractable leashes in busy areas as irresponsible use has made some people uncomfortable around dogs that may or may not be fully under control. It's your responsibility to prevent dog bites, too, and to show people that dog owners in their neighborhood are considerate and responsible.

The important thing to remember is that any dog can be dangerous and any dog can bite. Use proper judgment, ask permission before touching or playing with a dog, and make confident, slow movements. Being smart about your interactions with dogs can help prevent bites and can make a positive experience for both you and the dog.

Dog Bite Prevention information provided by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA)