

## **Dog Bite Prevention**

Our topics for this week are:

- Dog breeds and bites
- Steps to avoid dog bites
- Actions that provoke dog bites
- Teaching children to avoid dog bites
- Adult handler management of dog attack
- Factors that lead to dogs biting dogs

### **Breeds and Bites**

Breeds of dogs that have been selectively bred for aggressive behavior do not have the same temperament as breeds that were not bred for that trait. However, members of aggressive breeds can have the trait of aggressiveness encouraged or discouraged by their socialization as a puppy and handling as an adult. A dog's handling, socialization, and training have more to do with the risk of bite or lethal ability than the breed. However without proper handling, some breeds are more inherently dangerous due to their size, gender, and breeding. For example, a Labrador retriever has been bred to willing to jump in water and most can be trained to retrieve ducks. A Yorkshire terrier will not willingly jump in water and cannot be trained to retrieve ducks. Breeds selectively bred to protect people or property or to move or fight other animals are more likely to develop the courage to bite a human. Pit bull-type dogs were bred from bulldogs and terriers to fight bears and bulls (bear-baiting and bull-baiting). Later, they were bred to fight each other in pits.

In a study of dogs causing fatal attacks on humans during the 1980s and 1990s in the U.S., dogs with a pit bull appearance were responsible for the majority of the attacks. A breed named pit bulls is not recognized by the AKC, but up to 20 breeds have some characteristics of what is popularly referred to as a pit bull. Pit bulls are derived from American Staffordshire terriers, American pit bull terriers, and/or Staffordshire bull terriers. Registered American Staffordshire terriers, American pit bull terriers, and/or Staffordshire bull terriers are usually properly socialized to other dogs and to humans and trained to be good canine citizens.

The pit bull-type dogs responsible for human fatalities are typically mixed-breed, poorly socialized or unsocialized, tethered, intact male, or taunted or trained to become more aggressive. Any dog that is not properly socialized can become dangerous. A breed called pit bull is recognized by the United Kennel Club and the American Dog Breeders Association. Although pit bull-like dogs are the breed type responsible for the most fatalities, they are believed to constitute only 6% of dog population in the U.S. Rottweiler dogs were responsible for the second greatest number of fatalities and German shepherd dogs were third in a 20 year long study of fatalities caused by dogs in the U.S. It has been argued that pit bulls were bred for their temperament and have no standard appearance. Because of this, it has been claimed that many bite reports have misidentified other dogs as pit bulls due to their unfortunate reputation. Misidentification of any breed is a common occurrence by the uninformed, but there are relative distinct physical characteristics of pit bulls with which most people knowledgeable of common

dog breeds are aware.

Pit Bull Terriers are dogs that have identifiable features of Staffordshire bull terriers, American Staffordshire terriers, or American pit bull terriers, including mixed breeds if they display predominant features of any of these three breeds. Features of pit bull terrier type dogs include a height of 18 to 24 inches at the shoulder and weight between 30 to 60 pounds. Their bodies are muscular with a wide chest. They have a large wedge-shaped head that is in proportion with the rest of the body. Slight wrinkles are present on the forehead. The hair coat is short and without an undercoat. They may come in any color, except merle and they may be solid-colored or have patches of color. Their eyes may also be any color, except blue. The ears are either cropped or, when left natural, they are rose shaped or semi-prick. The short tail is tapered. Since the body type is distinctive, breed-specific legislation is legally enforceable.

Many pit bulls are often used for illegal activities by irresponsible owners who do not socialize them to other dogs and to humans and taunt them to become aggressive. As a result, pit bulls are believed to be the most abused dog breed in the U.S. Pit bulls are the dog breed of choice for dog fighters, drug dealers, and people who want to project an image of intimidation. Dogs that inflict serious bites are often acquired and trained by thoughtless or sinister people to be a weapon or to give the appearance of a weapon. Aggressive pit bulls are exceedingly dangerous because of the tendency to not signal before a bite, bite and hold, and fail to be deterred by weapons or being kicked. They are more prone to attack the victim's face or the abdomen of a victim. Pit bulls cannot be imported into the UK, France, Australia, and the Netherlands.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has reported the dog breeds most often involved in fatal human attacks, which were:

- Pit bulls
- Rottweilers
- German shepherd dogs
- Huskies
- Alaskan Malamutes
- Doberman pinschers
- Chow-chows
- Great Danes
- Akitas

An association of liability lawyers lists pit bulls, Rottweilers, chows, and Akitas as the most dangerous dogs. In March 2009, the U.S. Army and Marine Corps prohibited pit bulls, Rottweilers, Doberman pinschers, chow-chows, and wolf-hybrids in U.S. military housing units due to the risk of severe bites. The dog breeds are ineligible for insurance coverage for bites by some companies included pit bulls, Rottweilers, German shepherd dogs, chow-chows, Mastiffs, Akitas, and Doberman pinschers.

For more information, visit: <http://dogbitelaw.com/>

### **Attempts to Control Bites by Controlling Breeds**

Banning dog breeds associated with most dog bites is not the only answer, but it can play an important role in reducing dog bites. Veterinary, law, and animal control associations do not

recommend attempts to legislate the prohibition to only one risk factor for dog bites, such as bans on breeds. The American Veterinary Medical Association and the American Bar Association do not support breed bans, but they are concerned about public safety involving dangerous dogs. Although a single factor approach is inadvisable, only some breeds are big and strong enough to inflict serious injuries or become a lethal hazard. These breeds were genetically selected for their size, strength, fearlessness, and aggressiveness to serve as personal and property guardians. Their inbred tendencies may not be manifested unless the dog is not socialized or trained to express and refine their aggressiveness. A dog that can bite once and inflict great damage or death is a far more significant threat to public safety than a little dog that bites frequently and hurts no one.

The choice should neither be to ban all members of the breed, nor to give all pit bulls the benefit of doubt. People should be allowed to own big, strong, and potentially aggressive dog breeds if they can prove that their dog has been properly socialized and is adequately controlled. They should also be required to have liability insurance that covers the possibility that their dog might bite and injure someone. Requiring evidence of a pedigree, certificate of American Kennel Club Canine Good Citizen training, the dog being neutered, and having three or fewer dogs in the same household would significantly reduce the risk of serious or fatal dog bites. If a high risk breed dog is pedigreed, the risk is usually not high. Fighting dogs and drug dealer dogs are usually mixed breeds. A certificate of professional training from a qualified trainer usually indicates the dog is not at high risk for biting. Dogs in households with three or fewer dogs are less likely to be a risk for aggressive biting. If a dog has been neutered, it suggests the owner is a responsible owner and that the dog is more likely socialized.

Whenever there is doubt that a dog is safe to be around, having the dog wear a harness with a chain lead and a basket muzzle, when among the public, is an alternative to a complete ban simply based on breed. Rather than band based on breed, bans may be beneficial if they are on selected pit pulls, Rottweilers, and other strong personal or property protection dogs that are (1) not purebred, (2) have not been certified as having puppy classes before four months of age, and (3) are not always on a leash if not in another dog-proof enclosure.

### **Steps to Avoid Dog Bites**

Preventing bites includes selecting a dog appropriate for a family's living situation and family members, socializing the dog to other humans and animals in the first four months of its life, and training the dog to simple commands. The dog should also be kept on a leash in public, and owners need to avoid aggressive games like wrestling or tug-of-war with the dog. If the dog is male, it should be neutered early in life. A safe and secure containment (well-maintained fence, kennel, crates) should be maintained. Tethering dogs should be strictly avoided. Each dog should receive play time and short periods of training each day. Isolated dogs become irritable, unsocial dogs. Actions that provoke dog attacks should be avoided, such as:

- Tethering
- Teasing or taunting
- Invading a dog's territory
- Wrestling games with dogs
- Loud, sudden noises (firecrackers, gun fire)
- Competing for food (bothering a dog that is eating)

- Presence of a female dog in heat
- Demonstrating fear

### **Teaching Children to Avoid Dog Bites**

Supervised contact between dogs and children is beneficial to both. However, a baby or small child (less than six years old) should never be left unsupervised with a dog, particularly larger ones (more than 50 lb.). Children need to be told, and shown by example, how to properly handle dogs. No one should tease dogs by pretending to hit or kick or to take their food, toys, or treats. A dog's ears or tail should not be pulled, and dogs should not be sat on, climbed on, or ridden. Children should never approach a strange dog, nor run from or past a dog. They should watch for and avoid unleashed dogs. If approached, a child should freeze ("be like a tree") but not stare directly at the dog. They should count slowly to five and then slowing more away backward or sideways. They should never turn their back on the dog. Dogs that are nursing, eating, in their crate, or sleeping should not be disturbed. Dogs should not be petted without permission from its owner. Children should never reach over a fence or into a car or truck to pet a dog. If knocked down by a dog, the child should "be like a rock", i.e., roll into a ball, cover their face and neck with their hands and arms, stay still, and not scream.

### **Adult Handler Response to Dog Attack**

Defense in dog attacks can either be reactive or proactive, but preparation for both is advisable. Basic defense includes not screaming, avoiding eye contact, remaining motionless, and backing away slowly when the dog moves away or hesitates. Preparation for an attack by a large dog begins with knowing to avoid running from the dog if not absolutely positive there is time and a definitive way to escape. If an attack appears unavoidable, an obstruction (bag, backpack, umbrella, coat, bicycle, car, etc.) should be sought to be between the victim and the dog. The dog should be ordered to "BACK OFF" with a low stern voice and occasional yells for help. Wrapping an arm with a coat can help in fending off an attack. If the dog attacks an arm, it should be kicked hard and repeatedly until it releases. A nearby stout stick or similar object should be sought that can be used to keep the dog at bay while backing toward safety. If there is no escape evident and no nearby object to use as a weapon, a stationary object should be grabbed to prevent the dog from knocking or pulling a victim to the ground. If knocked to the ground, a victim should curl up in fetal position and press his fists into his neck while keeping his elbows firmly against his chest and his legs curled up and held tightly together. This position will protect the carotid, brachial, and femoral arteries as well as the abdomen.

Proactive defenses begin with never trying to handle an aggressive large dog without another capable handler present. It is also important to be mindful of both the dog's body language and the handler's. Handler body language suggesting fear of the dog can provoke an attack. Other proactive defenses can be nonlethal dog defense weapons. The policy of the American Veterinary Medical Association is that Electro Muscular Disruption Devices (EMDDs), also called stun guns or tasers, should not be used on any animal for routine capture or restraint. Animal control or law enforcement officers may use EMDDs with non-lethal force to respond to aggressive dogs. Sprays that use capsaicin, citronella, and similar irritants require close proximity and accurate aim. They may also infuriate an excited dog rather than deter it. Air horns can be effective deterrents at a greater distance and do not require aim. Using an air horn can also deter multiple dogs simultaneously and alert others to either help or to avoid the

aggressive dog.

Another proactive defense against dog bites is to encourage the elimination of bite-provoking stimuli. Actions or circumstances that can provoke a dog to bite include being tethered on a rope or chain, teasing, taunting, play wrestling, trying to protect food or puppies, presence of a female in heat, and loud noises such as firecrackers or gun fire. Dangerous dog legislation should also prohibit tethering which has been shown to cause dogs to be more aggressive.

### **Dog Safety**

More dogs are subjected to pain and suffering by poor care by humans than there are humans who are seriously bitten by dogs. Lack of socialization and improper containment are the primary safety hazards to dogs. Many problems that lead to relinquishing dogs to shelters stem from poor socialization while a puppy. Improper containment such as tethering or allowing dogs to ride loose in pickup beds puts dogs at multiple risks. A lack of containment can lead to dogs being hit by cars, running in packs, and other harmful sequelae.

Introducing a dog to new dogs can be hazardous. Distractions should be minimized. The introduction should be on neutral ground with both dogs on a short leash, preferably with just one handler per dog. Time for the dogs to assess each other by sight and smell at a distance from each other is important. Based on the body language of each, the distance can be gradually reduced until they can do anogenital smelling.

Signs of overstimulation or aggression should signal handlers to separate the dogs. Alert signs for separation include growling, teeth baring, prolonged direct stares, stiff-legged gait, and attempt to stand on top of the other dog.

Now, let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- Owners of large, muscular, potentially aggressive dogs need to assume greater responsibility in preventing dog bites.
- Breeds of dogs do not need to be prohibited, but the ownership of certain potentially aggressive breeds should be regulated to ensure responsible handling of those breeds.
- Tethering a dog increases the risk it will bite a person.
- Children must be taught how to avoid dog bites.
- Air horns may be the most effective deterrent to dog attack.

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint* published by CRC Press. It is also available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is available at [www.betteranimalhandling.com](http://www.betteranimalhandling.com)

Don't forget serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.