

Dog Bites Are Increasing in the U.S.

Our topics for this week are:

- **The growing risk of dog bites**
- **Causes for increasing incidences of serious dog bites**
- **How to reduce the risk of serious dog bites, including fatalities**

Growing Incidence

The number of dog bites and fatal dog attacks in the United States has increased in the last decade. In California, dog bites requiring a visit to an Emergency Room have increased 70% in the last 15 years and the rate of hospitalization from dog bites has doubled, as has the death rate from dog bites. The Centers for Disease Control estimates that the number of fatal dog attacks has more than doubled, from around 40 per year to nearly 100 after the pandemic,. In 2020, the Journal of Craniofacial Surgery reported that dog bite injuries nearly tripled in pediatric ER visits over several months, and a study in the Journal of Surgical Research found that the rate of dog bites involving children increased by 25%. The average cost of lawsuit if your dog bites someone was \$64,555 in 2022.

Potential Causes

Likely causes of the increase in dog bites include to the COVID-19 pandemic, the increase in no-kill shelters, growing popularity in aggressive breeds, and a reduction in breed-related bans.

Pet ownership also increased during the pandemic, with the American Veterinary Medical Association reporting that the percentage of US households with at least one dog rose from 38% to 45% between 2016 and 2020. Dogs during the pandemic were often not socialized during the critical first 16 weeks of life to a variety of humans or received basic training.

The pandemic was not the only cause. The rise in dog bites began even earlier, with fatal dog bites increasing by 37% between 2018 and 2019. Much controversy over breed bans has occurred in the last 15 to 20 years. Many communities adopted breed bans and then rescinded them in the last 5 to 10 years. Dogs that would have been previously deemed too aggressive to adopt out have been released to families ill-prepared to deal with an unsocialized, untrained, high-drive, aggressive breed of dog. This was fueled to greater numbers of biting dogs when many adopted, untrained pandemic dogs were relinquished to animal shelters to be adopted out again.

Breeds and Bites

Even though certain breeds, particularly pit bulls, are more involved in serious bite injuries, legislation against breeds is problematic and out of focus on the basic problem. The basic problem is dangerous dogs which can be any dog over about 40 pounds. All communities should have city, county, and/or state legislation on the control of dangerous dogs that have criteria to aid in recognizing a dangerous dog before it bites someone. One “free bite” laws are irresponsible, feeble attempts to reduce serious dog bites. Breed bans that include pit bulls and German shepherd dogs will decrease the incidence of bites, but this is a blinded, knee-jerk reaction to dog bites. Listings of breeds involved in bite provides useful information on the breeds with physical ability and potentially the behavioral ability to cause serious damage. They do not mean that all individual dogs in certain breeds are dangerous. On the other hand, simply eliminating breed bans is generally a determination of groups that only concern themselves with the effects on potentially dangerous dogs and their owners. Victims or future victims of dangerous dogs, who are principally children under the age of 10 years in poor sections of cities or in rural environments, are not represented in the decision making.

Need to Respond

The bottom line is that dog bites are a serious public health concern. Breed bans are not the answer. Ignoring the need to ensure proper socialization and training of breeds with the propensity to become a dangerous dogs is irresponsible. Universal dangerous dog legislation is needed to protect future victims of dog bites, especially young children.

So, how could dangerous dog laws be fair and effective? First, all dogs should be required to be licensed. Licensing should not be limited to proof of rabies vaccination. All dogs should be scored by bite risk criteria. These should include age, gender, weight, socialization, training, means of confinement, and breed. Owners of dogs with scores above a significant risk score should have to prove the dog has gone through a socialization and basic training program, plus have containment which does not promote aggression such as being tethered. Failure to achieve a license by this route should require those owners to have to keep their dog in dangerous dog confinement at home and wear a leash and muzzle when taken out of confinement. Failure of achieving a license through either route should result in a court ordered confiscation of the dog and fine for having no license.

Is this excessive? Compare it to what is required to have a driver's license. Explain why it is excessive to the parents of a small child mangled or killed by a dog that could not pass the screening scores for being a dangerous dog.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

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

- 1. The incidence of serious dog bites, including fatalities in the U.S. have been increasing.**
- 2. Reports of dog breeds involved in serious dog bites is helpful information but dog breed bans are a poor answer to reducing the incidence of dog bites.**
- 3. Children under the age of 10 years are the most common victims of serious dog bites.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 250 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

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.