



The biting truth about dogs

Health Beat

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August 07, 2009 05:30 am

Dogs are great companions and much-loved members of many families. But all dogs can bite, so their owners must take responsibility to prevent this very normal, but often dangerous behavior.

"Dogs are not furry children," said Dianne Foster, animal inspector for the City of Gloucester. "They are dogs, not children with human qualities, and every dog bites. It's what they do."

"Dogs are everywhere now, and people expect their dogs to interact in public," she said, so there are more opportunities for dogs to bite and more reports of this in recent years.

Foster investigates instances of reported dog bites, and said it is common for adults to receive bite wounds on their legs or hands, but unfortunately, children are often bitten in the face because they are eye level to many mid-size dogs.

"I've seen lots of little kids with bites this summer," she said.

Foster said she has never met a dog that aggressively bites people for no reason, but it is an instinctive response for dogs to bite when they are fearful, startled or protecting their turf.

"Biting is a dog's defense," she said, and they will often bite to protect their territory, food and toys.

Jamie LeVie, Gloucester's animal control officer and dog warden, said, "All dogs bite, but most bites are not a sign of viciousness, and many dogs only bite one time."

Dogs in pain are more likely to bite, and older dogs that are losing their hearing and eyesight are easily frightened and may react by biting, he said. He added that dogs bite their owners as often as they bite strangers. In fact, he received more calls from bitten pet owners last year than from outside parties.

Many people believe that large, strong breeds like pit bull terriers or Rottweilers are the most likely to bite, but they are not. "Actually, the highest biting dog is the Chihuahua," LeVie said, "but if a pit bull bites, you will hear about it. Their propensity for biting isn't greater, but they always show up in the papers." Likewise, no one can assume his or her dog will not bite, even if he owns a so-called gentle breed like a golden retriever, Foster said.

LeVie agreed that predicting dog behavior by being "breed-specific" does not work. "I have seen black Labs and springer spaniels go crazy, so it's not about the dog. It's about the owners."

Since all dogs can bite, owners bear the ultimate responsibility for controlling their pets. "If your dog bites someone, it's your fault," Foster said. "And you will more than likely be sued."

Dog bites, she added, often cost owners \$10,000 to \$15,000, so there is both a moral and financial incentive to keep dogs restrained.

If a dog bites a person or other pet, they must be quarantined for 10 days to ensure there is no sign of rabies, per city ordinance. If there is no proof of vaccination, the quarantine will be much longer, and in rare cases, the animal could be euthanized for testing.

That is an unpleasant scenario, so preventing dog bites is the best strategy to ensure harmony between dogs and people.

The first step is to understand the dog's nature and needs before adopting it, Foster said. "Do your research before you get a dog." She observed that many people acquire dogs because they like their looks or the breed has been popularized by celebrities and the entertainment world. However, these owners may be unprepared to manage their dog's tendencies and the dog could become a nuisance.

"I have not met any bad dogs, but I have met bad dog owners," she said.

Shelters, such as Cape Ann Animal Aid, are happy to offer guidance and match a family with an appropriate dog. Reputable, long-established dog breeders, those who concentrate on improving the breed, are another option. Puppy mills and backyard breeders who breed for profit must be avoided, because these operate inhumanely and care little about instilling the best qualities in their animals.

After the dog comes home, it should be neutered or spayed, because non-neutered animals, especially males, are more likely to become aggressive. To protect against unknown dogs, Foster tells people "never go up to a dog you don't know, period, and always, always ask before you pet someone else's dog and talk to the owner." It is especially important for parents to teach their children this precaution.

If two dogs seem to be on the verge of fighting, they should be pulled away on their leashes, but no one should try to break up a fight by getting in the middle or using their hands. A hose or long stick can be used to shoo the dogs away from each other.

LaVie also asks local residents to suppress their helpful instincts and avoid loose dogs, which will prevent many bites. He says it is his job to round up these dogs, so if one is spotted, call animal control and leave the dog alone. There is a leash (and registration) law in Gloucester, so dogs should not be running loose in public anyway. In his opinion, the best way to approach a dog is from the side, not straight on, and he advises against reaching over its head.

Foster said to stand still if a dog seems aggressive, because most dogs like a chase, and will pursue someone who runs away. Flailing the hands is also unwise because it may prompt the dog to bite.

"When you are talking about dog-anything, common sense goes a long way," LeVie said.

To report a loose dog, call Animal Control at 978-281-9746. To report a dog bite or for more information, contact the Health Department at 978-281-9771.

This article is part of a regular health education series provided by the Gloucester Health Department and Addison Gilbert Hospital.

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