

Dog bites are more serious than you think. Here's how to avoid risky situations

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With 2023 now well underway, you may find yourself hitting the local

walking trails—home to new athletes like yourself, and their well-meaning, but sometimes aggressive dogs, which can deliver a serious bite if you're not careful.

Even if you're minding your own business while on your new year's jog, dogs can [bite](#) you. More than 4.5 million people in the United States are bitten by dogs each year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports.

And according to the American Veterinary Medical Association, dog bites present a serious health risk to humans, especially for [children](#), who make up half of bitten victims. Nearly one in five victims require medical attention.

In 2022, the nonprofit Friends of the Katy Trail said it didn't receive any reports of dog bites. Ashley Navarrette, clinical assistant at Texas A&M's College of Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Science, said that in her veterinary practice, she has seen many instances of dog-on-dog aggression, adding that [dog bites](#) are an issue in Texas.

The good news is that most dogs only attack humans when provoked—and most bites are preventable. But even the sweetest of dogs can deliver a mean bite.

Here's what to know about dogs and their ability to bite, and some tips on how to avoid getting into risky situations involving canine aggression.

When and why do dogs bite?

Just like other animals, dogs have a self-defense mechanism in place to fend them from [dangerous situations](#).

When dogs find themselves in a stressful situation or feel threatened,

they may bite to defend themselves and their territory, the AVMA says.

"I would say, more often than not, the highest incident is fear-based," said Navarrette, who is a director of primary care services at A&M's veterinary school. "They're fearful of whatever situation it is."

During times of fear, dogs can either run away or fight. Oftentimes dogs can't run away, so they resort to fighting.

Mother dogs may employ aggression if they feel their puppy is in danger. Other dogs may bite if they feel sick, sore from injury or want to be left alone, according to the AVMA.

Which dogs bite?

A dog's ability to bite does not depend on their breed. Navarrette added that cats also have the capacity to bite people and other animals.

The AVMA cautions that an individual dog's behavior determines their capacity to bite, meaning any dog can bite—big or small; male or female; young or old.

Navarrette noted that she sees heightened levels of aggression in intact dogs, or dogs who haven't been neutered or spayed.

Who is most vulnerable to dog bites?

Children face a much higher risk of getting bitten by a dog, especially those who are unsupervised and may not know how to act around dogs.

Due to their height, some children may be more likely to be at the same level of a dog, which makes them more vulnerable to facial bites. These

wounds tend to be more traumatic than injuries on hands and feet, Naverette said.

How to avoid dog bites

In order to avoid getting into a risky situation, it's important to pay attention to dogs' body language, Naverette said.

Fortunately, there are some tell-tale signs. In addition to barking and growling, dogs often lick their lips or try to lean away from a situation that could escalate. Other common indicators of impending aggression include dilated pupils and perked-up ears.

"Another thing you'll notice is when they're getting closer and closer, you will start to notice that their mouth will start to tense," Naverette said.

She also recommends parents educate their children on how to appropriately and safely interact with dogs. Not all [dogs](#) are comfortable around humans and could have a history of aggression.

"I think most of us were probably taught the way to greet a dog is to put your hand out ... and that's actually not great because that's entering their space," she said.

The clinician noted that it's better for the dog to approach you instead, and "make the conscious decision to interact with you."

If you get bitten by a dog, it's best to seek [medical attention](#) soon and consult with a physician to get treatment. Bites can vary in size and severity.

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