

Spring, summer is peak time for dogs biting kids

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In the spring and summer, everyone races outside with their dogs to

enjoy the warmer weather, but a new study suggests there is a downside to that.

More children are bitten by [dogs](#) in those months, according to researchers at Nemours Children's Health.

But a dog bite isn't inevitable: It's possible to keep both dogs and children safer, and to provide proper care if the unfortunate does happen, researchers say.

Some of this is simply a good reminder, as people are less contained than they were during the pandemic, a time in which many people adopted dogs and puppies, according to researcher [Dr. Edward Caterson](#), division chief of pediatric plastic surgery at Nemours Children's Health in Wilmington, Del.

"Sometimes in medicine, we'll actually just state the obvious in a statistical and a medically important way, only to call attention to a public health issue—and that is that an ER visit is a frequent event in [dog bites](#)," Caterson said.

In the study, the researchers used the U.S. National Electronic Injury Surveillance System to collect data on a decade's worth of patient records, from 2010 to 2020.

Among the more than 152 million patients in the system, 46 million were children and 0.08% of those kids were seen at emergency departments with dog bites.

More of those bites happened in the spring and summer, the investigators found.

The study concluded that a significant increase in dog bites among

children in spring and summer should provide public health agencies and [health systems](#), as well as caregivers, the information they need to reduce these injuries.

While sometimes minor bites may be treated at home, children are often seen in the [emergency room](#) needing local treatment and antibiotics, Caterson said. That may or may not include stitches, but would include cleaning the wound.

As part of his job, Caterson sees dog bites that reach that next level.

In [older children](#) and teens, who may be more able to fend off a dog, that can mean more bites on extremities, such as a leg bitten while running away or wounds on the hands or arms.

Younger children are more likely to be bitten on the face or torso. Toddlers tend to have more head and scalp wounds, he noted.

"That's because they'll be crawling along the ground. They're at the dog's level as far as face to face, and that's where the greater insult can happen," Caterson said.

It isn't just stray or strange dogs encountered in a neighborhood that can present a risk. Even a typically amiable dog at home can injure a child if they're territorial over food, Caterson noted.

This can also happen if a child accidentally hurts the family pet, perhaps stepping on them, said [Dr. Darria Gillespie](#), a clinical assistant professor at the University of Tennessee Health Science Center in Knoxville.

"They snap really quickly and if the child's hand happens to be by the face, the dog immediately releases it, but it's already caused significant damage with that tearing and crushing," Gillespie said.

She noted that while cat bites are like little hypodermic needles injecting bacteria deep under the surface, dogs' larger mouths and teeth tend to cause more of a tearing and crushing injury.

Often in the ER, doctors typically will not suture the wounds closed because it's important to not entrap any potential bacteria that can cause an infection, Gillespie said. If the wound is gaping, they may do a couple of loose stitches to bring the wound together but still allow for drainage.

It's different if the wound is someplace disfiguring such as on the face, in which case the wound will be stitched and then monitored carefully.

Caterson and Gillespie each offered some suggestions for keeping children safe from dog bites in all months of the year.

For starters, it's important for dog owners to maintain control of their dogs. That means keeping them behind fences or on leashes, and being clear with passersby about not touching.

"And that's important, obviously, to be thinking about how do you handle your own pet such that they don't become a liability for a child in the neighborhood?" Caterson said.

Parents should also be clear with their children that they shouldn't trespass or take shortcuts through someone's yard, he said.

They should teach their children about how to approach strange dogs, Gillespie said, and that can include not approaching them.

"That's one of the things you really have to teach your children is that just because you have a friendly dog at home, you do not go up to dogs that you don't know. Even if it's on somebody's leash, you don't go up to them unless mom or dad, a parent or adult, asks if it's OK for you to pet

the dog," Gillespie said.

It is, of course, also important for parents to teach their [children](#) to be kind to their own dogs at home.

If a child is bitten and the [bite](#) breaks the skin, it's important to take them to a doctor, Gillespie said.

These wounds can easily become infected with the bacteria from the animal's mouth. A doctor can provide antibiotics, as well as assess whether the child needs a tetanus shot or, potentially, rabies shots.

"And then the fourth question is how do we clean it and then do we suture it or not?" Gillespie said.

An ER doctor or your [health care provider](#) should be able to answer those questions.

The research was presented May 1 at the Pediatric Academic Societies meeting, in Washington, D.C. Findings presented at medical meetings should be considered preliminary until published in a peer-reviewed journal.

More information: The American Veterinary Medical Association has more on [dog bite prevention](#).

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