

Study shows young, unsupervised children most at risk for dog bites

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As dog bites become an increasingly major public health concern, a new study shows that unsupervised children are most at risk for bites, that the culprits are usually family pets and if they bite once, they will bite again with the second attack often more brutal than the first.

The study, the largest of its kind, was done by Vikram Durairaj, MD, of the University of Colorado School of Medicine, who found that dogs usually target a child's face and eyes and most often it's a breed considered 'good' with children, like a Labrador retriever.

"People tend to think the family dog is harmless, but it's not," said Durairaj, associate professor of Ophthalmology and Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery, who presented his study last month at the American Academy of Ophthalmology's annual meeting. "We have seen facial fractures around the eye, eye lids torn off, injury to the tear drainage system and the eyeball itself."

Some wounds are so severe that patients require multiple reconstructive surgeries.

Durairaj said dog bites are especially devastating to children because they are smaller and their faces are within easy reach of the animal's mouth. The likelihood of a child getting bitten in their lifetime is around 50 percent with 80 percent of those bites involving the head and neck.

According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), about 4.5

million people are bitten by dogs each year and 885,000 require medical attention. The total cost is estimated at up to \$250 million.

The study looked at 537 children treated for facial dog bites at The Children's Hospital on the University of Colorado's Anschutz Medical Campus between 2003 and 2008. Durairaj found that 68 percent of bites occurred in children 5-years-old or younger with the highest incidence in 3-year-olds. In the majority of cases, the child knew the dog through the family, a friend or a neighbor. And more than half the time, the dog was provoked when the child petted it too aggressively, startled or stepped on it.

The dogs were not breeds usually associated with attacks. Durairaj found that mixed breeds were responsible for 23 percent of bites followed by Labrador retrievers at 13.7 percent. Rottweilers launched attacks in 4.9 percent of cases, German shepherds 4.4 percent of the time and Golden retrievers 3 percent. The study was done in the Denver area where pit bulls are banned.

"What is clear from our data is that virtually any breed of dog can bite," Durairaj said. "The tendency of a dog to bite is related to heredity, early experience, later socialization and training, health and victim behavior."

He stressed that familiarity with a dog is no guard against attack and if a dog bites once, it will likely bite again with the second attack often more vicious than the first. The first time a [dog bites](#), he said, it should be removed from the home.

"I was called in to see a dog bite. A girl had a puncture wound to her lip. Two days later I saw the same girl, but this time her eyelids were torn off and she had severe scalp and ear lacerations," Durairaj said. "The onus is on parents to recognize aggressive breeds as well as behaviors and never allow their young [children](#) to be left unsupervised around any dog."

Provided by University of Colorado Denver

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