

CENTRAL CONNECTICUT HEALTH DISTRICT

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In May, Focus on Preventing Dog Bites

Twelve-year-old Kelly Voigt was attacked within a month of her seventh birthday. Severe lacerations and puncture wounds inflicted by a "friendly" neighborhood dog required a plastic surgeon, nearly 100 stitches to her face and neck and two years of follow up. Her mental scars were also severe. Within a few months she was treated by a psychologist for post-traumatic stress syndrome and depression. This was the opening paragraph of a press release issued by the American Veterinary Medical Association in 2004 during National Dog Bite Awareness Week, which occurs each year during the third week of May. Fortunately, Kelly recovered, and later, she, her mother, and a school psychologist formed Prevent the Bite, Inc. (www.preventthebite.com) to provide instruction about dog bite injury prevention.

Kelly's story is not unusual; every year, 4.7 million people in the United States are bitten by dogs, and 60% of them are children. In fact, the highest rate for dog-bite injuries is found in children aged 5 to 9. Among children under the age of 5, most injuries occur to the head and neck region, and injury rates are higher for boys than girls at any age. Bites on the face can result in severe lacerations, infections, and scars, and thousands of people require cosmetic surgery to repair their wounds. Approximately 800,000 Americans obtain medical attention for dog bites; of these, 386,000 people are treated in an emergency department, and about 12 people die from their injuries.

According to the Humane Society of the United States, small children are joined by the elderly and U.S. Postal Service letter-carriers as the most frequent victims of dog bites.

While cartoons depicting a family dog chasing the mailman are not particularly amusing, they do reflect the reality faced daily by letter carriers. In 2004, 3,400 workers delivering mail were bitten, mostly by dogs proclaimed to be friendly by their owners. The U.S. Postal Service estimates that medical expenses, workers' compensation, legal costs, replacing carriers, and curtailing delivery are costs included in the \$25 million price tag associated with dog-bite injuries. That \$25 million is only part of the \$345.5 million paid out annually by insurance companies for dog bite claims in the U.S., according to the Insurance Information Institute.

Fortunately, the incidence of dog bites can be reduced by practicing safety measures in a number of areas. Before acquiring a dog as a pet, prospective owners should

- Learn about suitable breeds for their particular household.
- Try to find out if the dog has a history of aggression, and do not adopt such a dog in a house with children.
- Delay adopting a dog if a child in the house is afraid of dogs.
- Spay or neuter all pet dogs to reduce aggression.
- Refrain from playing aggressive games with your dog.
- Be sure to have your dog trained and properly socialized to learn submissive behaviors.
- Stay current with rabies vaccinations as well as other vaccinations.
- Seek professional assistance if the dog develops undesirable behaviors.

When encountering any dog:

- Never approach an unfamiliar dog; if an unfamiliar dog approaches you, stand still, do not scream, and do not run. Avoid eye contact.
- If you are knocked over by a dog, roll into a ball, protect your face and lay still.
- Never approach a dog that is eating, sleeping, or caring for puppies.
- Allow the dog to sniff you before attempting to pet or play with it. Always pet the dog in the direction the fur is growing.
- Do not leave small children and infants alone with a dog, and always supervise a child playing with a dog.
- Report stray dogs or dogs displaying unusual behavior to the police or the animal control officer.

If a dog bites, seek medical attention immediately. Control bleeding and wash the bite area with soap and water. In the emergency department at a hospital, ask for a certified plastic surgeon for consultation and possible treatment. Be sure to report all bites to the local public health agency, the police, and the local animal control officer. Be prepared to give an accurate description of the dog, the name of the dog's owner, if known, and a description of the circumstances surrounding the incident.

Remember, ALL dogs can bite if provoked. But a happy, healthy, well-trained dog is less likely to become irritable and bite for no obvious reason. To learn more about this public health concern, contact the Centers for Disease Control at www.cdc.gov/ncipc (1-800-232-4636), the American Veterinary Medical Association at www.avma.org (1-847-925-8070), or the National Association of Letter Carriers at www.malc.org (1-202-393-4695). Additional information about this or other public health concerns is available at the Central Connecticut Health District at www.ccthd.org (860-721-2822).