

Zoonoses Fact Sheet - Dog attacks and bites

Whilst dog bites are not are infectious diseases transmitted from animals to humans, they are a serious risk to human health.

Dog attacks and dog bites are common in remote communities, although as with most injuries, data on risk factors, incidence and severity are limited. It is important to recognize that dogs have physical and spiritual guarding roles in many communities, helping people to feel safe. However, overcrowded and unmanaged dogs can be dangerous.

<p>How do dog attacks affect communities?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bites are much more common than zoonotic infectious diseases • People can be killed by dog attacks, especially small children, the elderly and people with chronic disease • Physical trauma can be severe • Infection is common • Psychological trauma can be severe and long-lasting • Beyond the bite incident itself, fear of bites can limit other healthy activities such as walking around the community (e.g. for exercise, socialising, or to work) even for people that haven't been bitten. 
<p>Who is most at risk?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whilst in suburban areas most attacks occur with 0-4 year olds, anecdotal and hospital admission data in the NT show more adults (20-50 year olds) presenting for bite treatment.
<p>How do dog attacks occur?</p>	<p>There are many factors at play in any dog attack scenario. These may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The dog(s) involved are guarding something (e.g. territory, pack members, food); • Dogs are under stress (eg fighting, overcrowding); • The dog(s) are undesexed; • The dog has gotten away with biting before; • The person involved knowingly or unknowingly challenges or stimulates the dog(s); • The person involved is a stranger or acting strangely (e.g. under the influence); • Time of day: dogs tend to be more aggressive at night. 
<p>How can dog attacks be reduced?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce dog overpopulation so dogs don't form roaming packs • Surgical or temporary chemical de-sexing reduces territorial and aggressive tendencies. • Large breed hunting dogs should be appropriately managed – trained, adequately restrained and/or temporarily or permanently desexed. • Secure fencing around properties to limit dog roaming • Families not encouraging aggressive behaviour • Train community to recognize, avoid, or defuse potential dog bite situations • Remove dangerous dogs from the community • Provide community education about protective behaviour and responsible pet ownership • Enforcement of by-laws 

Sources: *Professor Richard Speare, Human Doctor and Veterinarian, James Cook University, Zoonoses training at QLD Health/AMRRIC Workshops, Yarrabah, 2008,*

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