

## Dog Bites

Although rumors are often spread about dogs congregating in packs and becoming public nuisances after disasters, few (if any) such rumors have been substantiated in the United States. Dogs are by nature gregarious and do not automatically become aggressive in disasters. Most dogs in the United States are pets and are not a threat to public safety. However, the chances of being bitten by a dog increase with certain factors (Table 27-6). In general, people who have no professional animal-handling experience may put themselves or others at risk by surprising or cornering a dog, handling an injured or ill animal, or intervening in a dog fight.

**Table 27-6** Comparison of urban "stray" dogs

Characteristic	Owned dog	Unowned dog
Origin	Offspring of owned dog or from breeders	Released or escaped pets
Abundance	Approximately 1/5 of owned population	Approximately 1/40 of stray population
Distribution	Associated with high human density and high socio-economic urban area	Associated with low human density and low socio-economic urban and rural areas
Home range	0.02-0.1 sq mile	0.2-11.0 sq mile
Activity	Before and after human activities	Nocturnal and crepuscular
Food	From owners and garbage	Garbage, some hunting
Social behavior	Solitary or seek human companionship	In groups of two or three isolated packs
Behavior with people	Friendly to aggressive	Wary, secretive
Mortality	Caused by owner intolerance, old age, injury, disease, or being caught by dog catcher	Injury, disease, or dog catcher
Dog bite risk	Very serious	Less serious
Dog waste problem	Increasing social and health problem	Less serious, unknown
Noise problem	Serious	Less serious
Control	Owner responsibility	Self-limiting

Data from Beck AM: Ecological aspects of urban stray dogs—update. In Voith VL and Borchelt PL, editors: *Readings in companion animal behavior*, Trenton, NJ, 1996, Veterinary Learning Systems.

The likelihood of exposure to dogs and therefore bites increases with human population density. When dogs roam without supervision, they usually do not stray far from home. This is probably also true for the majority of displaced dogs in a disaster, so the risk of dog bites probably relates most of all to the animals' natural territorial behavior. For example, dogs may want to protect where they live and become aggressive toward unfamiliar persons approaching them. Search and rescue personnel may encounter this situation after disasters and should use caution. Firefighters should develop clear policies about dealing with dogs that prevent entry into burning houses.

## Prevention of dog bites

When a dog interferes with the work of a disaster responder, the best solution is to locate the owner or an animal care provider who knows how to deal with dogs. Animal control personnel and humane groups should also be at disaster sites and can help. If a dog creates a persistent nuisance and the owner cannot be identified, animal control officers should be contacted to capture the dog. In many communities animal control officers are part of the sheriff's department.

A dog's behavior may show obvious signs of aggression, such as baring teeth and growling, or signs of friendliness, such as wagging the tail and keeping ears upright. However, these signs have many subtle variations, which may be misinterpreted by persons who do not deal with dogs routinely. It is safer for inexperienced disaster personnel to refer dog handling to others who are familiar and comfortable with handling dogs. If a dog attacks, it is best to stand still. Running incites hunting and chasing instincts in the dog. It is preferable to shout loudly and firmly "sit" or "down." This is often enough to exert dominance over a dog. Putting something (e.g., a trashcan lid) between the person and the dog or picking up an object and pretending to throw it at the dog

is often sufficient stimulus for the dog to leave. A person being attacked by a dog should protect the head and extremities.

All disaster workers who have been bitten by a dog should seek medical advice as soon as possible because bite wounds often become infected. If exposure to rabies is considered possible, postexposure prophylaxis for rabies should be initiated. Preexposure prophylaxis for rabies is recommended for disaster personnel. A dog that has bitten a person is considered a rabies suspect. These dogs should be quarantined for 10 days and observed for signs of disease. Alternatively a veterinarian should euthanize the dog and submit its head for rabies testing to the State Health Department.

Persons whose immune system is compromised should pay special attention to animal bites because infections can be more severe. Chemotherapy, diabetes, HIV infection, and spleen removal can result in immune system compromise.