

**Q: What is a dog bite?**

A: A dog bite is an incident where a dog inflicts an injury to a person, deliberately or otherwise. Out of a concern for the possible spread of disease, animal care & control and public health departments consider any incident in which a dog's tooth or nail breaks a person's skin, regardless of the circumstances and without any characterization of the dog's intention, to be an *animal exposure* that merits notice. Indeed, public health agencies are interested in tallying all such incidents involving any animal, not just dogs.

**Q: Is there a dog bite problem or epidemic?**

A: No. Though journalists and some academics have complained about a dog bite epidemic, in fact, reports of dog bites to public health agencies have declined significantly since the 1970's. Even the United States Postal Service, whose letter carriers have always had high exposures to dogs, reports dramatic decreases in dog bite-related injuries over the past decades, from over 7,000 OSHA-reportable injuries per year in the 1970s, to fewer than 2,700 OSHA-reportable injuries in 2010.

Not to minimize the trauma of any individual seriously injured by a dog, the fact remains that dog bite-related injuries are only a small percentage of unintentional injuries suffered each year by Americans. For example, in 2009, 325,000 Americans went to an emergency room because they had been injured by a dog. Eight million went because they had fallen down; and another 1.5 million went because they had been assaulted by another human being.

We suffer much more violence from each other than we do from dogs.

**Q: Is there a national recording system for tracking dog bites?**

A: No. There is no national system in the United States that tallies dog bite reports. State and local public health agencies collect data on animal exposures, including dog bites. They do not report data to the Federal government, or to any national humane agency or research institution.

The annual estimate for dog bites that is repeated in news reports is derived from telephone surveys, the first of which was conducted in 1994. From among the 5,328 persons who responded to this survey, interviewers obtained reports of 196 dog bites believed to have occurred within the 12 months prior to the interview. (Only 38 of those sought medical attention). The survey estimate is not corroborated by reports from state and local public health agencies.

**Q: Why do dogs bite?**

A: Each and every dog bite is situational and unique to the interaction between a particular dog and a particular person. Why a dog responded to a person with a bite is wholly dependent on the relationship (or lack of) between the person and the dog and the circumstances that occurred just prior to the bite.

**Q: Are all dog bites evidence of the same canine behavior?**

A: No. Dogs use their mouths and teeth for a variety of reasons. Many of the things dogs use their teeth for have nothing to do with aggression or the intention to inflict injury. Besides eating, one of the most frequent things dogs use their teeth for is play. Of those people who seek medical attention for a puncture wound inflicted by a dog, it is not uncommon to find the person explaining that the bite occurred during play, or when attempting to give a dog a treat.

For this, and other reasons, tallies or compilations of dog bites may shed little or no light on canine behavior in the community. A raw compilation of dog bite incidents assigns the same statistical value to an unintentional bite inflicted during play as it does to an intentional bite. This creates a distorted view of dogs and makes implications about dogs and aggression which may be inaccurate.

**Q: How do cities and counties keep track of dog bites?**

A: In most areas the local Animal Care and Control Services and/or the local Health Department maintain records on all *animal exposures*, including, but not limited to, dog bites. Dog bite data is obtained from reports provided by one or more of the following sources: a victim, owner, witness, a law enforcement officer, or medical personnel. In areas that have Animal Care and Control Services, an officer may be dispatched to collect vaccination data on the animal involved and investigate the incident to complete a bite report.

**Q: Do all communities publish dog bite reports for their citizens?**

A: No. While all health department agencies and/or animal control agencies collect data on animal exposures, this data is usually not available unless requested. Animal exposure data is collected as part of mandated rabies control and surveillance programs. This data may then be sorted by species (dog, cat, raccoon, bat, etc.), then further categorized by animal or victim characteristics (i.e, dog or cat breed, victim sex/age, etc.) While all agencies document the number of animal exposures, any specifics about the type of animal and type of bite is dependent on the recording methods of the individual agency.

**Q: How many dog bites are there in a year?**

A: No one knows. What we do know is that the overwhelming majority of them are very minor. (see below).

**Q: Should I report a dog bite?**

A: Yes. Dog bites (i.e., animal exposure) are considered a reportable incident in virtually all communities throughout the nation. The primary reason for reporting any animal bite is for the surveillance and control of rabies, and dog owners are always required to show proof of rabies vaccination after a reported bite. Additional reasons for reporting dog bites are to document chronically irresponsible owners who fail to provide humane care and control of their animals.

Researchers and public health agencies have complained for decades that citizens fail to notify the relevant authorities when they have been bitten by a dog, though the extent of this lack of reporting is the subject of widely varying estimates. NCRC does not suggest that an injury be left unattended, or that public health ordinances be ignored. However, we suspect that the reason for non-reporting of a dog bite is that the dog was known to the injured person, and that either the contact with the dog resulted in no identifiable injury, or that the injury was negligible.

**Q: How should we keep dog bites in perspective?**

A: In the United States alone, humans have hundreds of millions of interactions with dogs on a daily basis. The overwhelming majority of these interactions are pleasant for both humans and canines, and of the small number of interactions that result in human injury, many could have been avoided by some change in human behavior. To keep the risk of living with dogs in perspective, and to understand the risk dogs pose in comparison to other risks we regularly accept, we invite you to visit the Dog Bites section of our website: <http://nationalcanineresearchcouncil/dogbites>.