

# Avoiding Injury: Tips for Interpreting Signs of Aggression in Dogs

- Occasionally dogs will become fractious during handling; however, steps can be taken to minimize this potential problem.
- Minimizing dogs' exposure to sudden changes in the environment and acclimating them slowly to changes is important.
- Proper restraint of your dog is crucial to avoid injury when handling dogs.
- Wear protective clothing such as sturdy shoes.
- Always have an exit strategy when working with dogs; occasionally, dogs will not tolerate handling and should be placed in a secure environment until they adjust to a new situation and calm down.

## The Basics

While dogs have been domesticated by people for a long time, it is important to remember that they are still animals with a very strong instinct for “fight or flight” when danger is present. When presented with a threat, many dogs will try to escape; however, some dogs will choose to fight against the danger and may bite in response to the threat. It is important to

follow certain safety guidelines when working with dogs to avoid injury for you and your dog. Remember, an adult large breed dog may weigh as much as a person, and all sizes of dogs have sharp teeth that can easily injure a person with minimal effort. In fact, small breed dogs weighing less than 25 pounds are more likely to bite than larger breed dogs.

Common steps to avoid injury include using proper restraint. This can vary depending on the dog, but at minimum, a strong collar and leash in good condition should be used when handling dogs. It is vital to have the dog in a secure environment (e.g. a room with a closed door or a fenced yard) and ensure that the dog's collar is secure or the dog may be able to remove the collar and run away. In some cases, additional restraint such as a muzzle may be necessary.

Separating certain dogs such as non-neutered males and females or female dogs with puppies from other dogs on the property and using separate housing or crates is important. This will avoid exposing male dogs to female dogs in heat and the potential

## Tips To Remember When Working With Dogs

- Introduce dogs slowly to a new situation or to other dogs to avoid agitating them.
- When introducing dogs to new people or to other dogs, all of the dogs should be kept on leashes. This facilitates separating them if they try to fight or attack.
- Recognize signs of an agitated dog (e.g. frequent barking or growling, tail held in an erect position and waving back and forth, pacing and erect hair around their shoulders, erect or flattened ears). Back away if possible; then identify the stimulus, and either remove it if possible or wait a few minutes to see if the dog acclimates to the stimulus.
- Ask your veterinarian for tips and work with an experienced dog owner or handler to learn precautions that are necessary for handling dogs; keep certain groups of dogs such as non-neutered males and females or female dogs with puppies separated.
- It is important to contact your veterinarian if your dog is highly fractious or dangerous to handle. There may be an underlying disease that is causing this behavior.

## Behavior and Training

problems associated with their interaction. Female dogs with puppies are often very protective and may injure a person trying to interact with their puppies. In addition, only experienced people should handle non-neutered males or females with puppies. It also is important to approach dogs carefully and slowly, not staring at them because some dogs may bite when they feel threatened by someone approaching. It also is imperative to wear protective clothing around dogs, such as sturdy shoes, and avoid loose-fitting clothing that they can bite.

### What to Do

Introduce dogs slowly to a new situation or to new dogs to avoid agitating them. However, it is not always possible to avoid new situations, so it is important to recognize the signs of an agitated dog, which can include barking, growling, a tail held in an erect position and waving back and forth, pacing, and erect hair around their shoulders. The dog's ears may be erect or flattened against his/her head. An agitated dog may try to bite other dogs nearby, and if you approach, the dog may try to bite you.

Some dogs will show signs of fear such as avoiding your gaze, backing up as you approach, and hunching their back in a submissive position, but then lunge to bite you as you approach. This is called “fear biting” or “fear aggression.” If you notice this behavior, back slowly away from the dog to avoid escalating the situation. Then, try to determine what stimulus is causing the dog to appear fractious or agitated. Once you are able to identify the stimulus (e.g. a new dog in the area), remove the stimulus or wait a few minutes to see if the dog calms down. Most dogs will calm down once they adjust to the change

in the environment, if given a few minutes to adjust. If the stimulus can't be removed, it may help to distract the dog with dog food or a treat. Sometimes the dog needs to be walked away to another location.

Always have an exit strategy when working with dogs; occasionally, dogs will not tolerate handling and should be placed in a secure environment until they adjust to a new situation and calm down.

Do not stand in front of the dog; stand to the side if possible, out of the way of the dog's head. If the dog is confined, it may help to leave him/her alone for a few minutes; many dogs will calm down after they adjust.

### Prevention

Preventing dangerous situations is much easier than handling a dangerous situation, especially if you are a novice dog owner or handler. Working with an experienced dog owner or handler to learn precautions that are necessary for handling dogs is invaluable. Also, ask your veterinarian for tips. He/she is accustomed to handling dogs in difficult situations, such as when a dog is in pain. Many dogs will adapt to a new situation if given time; however, if your dog is highly fractious or dangerous to handle, it is important to contact your veterinarian for aid. Sometimes dogs can have diseases or pain that is causing the dangerous behavior.