



Animal bite prevention for the home healthcare worker



Introduction

Animal bites are common problems in the U.S. today. For the home healthcare worker, it is important to recognize when a client's pet may be a problem to one's safety and take the necessary measures to acknowledge the pet is secured during the care visit. While pets come in a wide variety of types and breeds, this RiskTopic focuses on dogs and cats.

Healthcare personnel who provide treatment or assistance to clients in the home setting are particularly vulnerable to injury from animal bites and/or scratches. Home healthcare providers often do not know or have experience in recognizing or reacting to aggressive animals in or around the home.

Discussion

Animal bites may occur for many different reasons. Food aggression, fear, pain, protective instinct and possession are just a few of the reasons animals may become aggressive. By identifying and understanding behaviors associated with aggressive animals, you may help reduce the potential for injury.

Cats¹

Cats have been known to provide emotional support, improve moods and increase morale of their owners, but just like any other animal, they can become aggressive. Cats' teeth are thin and sharp, and are more likely to cause puncture wounds. These wounds can reach into joints and bones and introduce bacteria deeply into the wounds. Cat bites are more of a puncture within the skin area. Because bacteria from a cat's mouth is embedded deep within the tissue, it's hard to fully clean and disinfect the wound, making it a prime environment for bacteria to grow. Professional medical treatment for any cat bite is important, as infection may occur in less than 12 hours. Cat bites have been associated with rabies, cat-scratch disease, MRSA and pasteurellosis. Treatment may include an IV antibiotic and/or oral antibiotic. Recognizing signs of aggression can be a key step in preventing a bite.

Signs of aggressive behavior in cats	Possible reasons
Hissing/spitting	A warning that the presence of something has made them unhappy
Arching back	Threat continues to encroach and the cat is getting ready to attack
Side presentation	Allows cat to appear larger and escape if necessary
Ears to side or back, with ear tips pointed upward	Unsure of what to do, analyzing their situation and planning their next move
Low body posture	Cat is fearful of threat and getting ready to defend itself if necessary
Dilated pupils	This is part of the fight-or-flight response when a cat feels threatened
Growling	Is annoyed, frightened, angry or aggressive
Charging	A defensive movement to scare threat away

Dogs²

From nips to bites to actual attacks, dog bites are serious problems. Most dog bites do not penetrate deeply enough to get bacteria into bones, tendons and joints, but they often do a lot of damage just from the trauma of the bite. The most common diseases from dog bites include rabies, MRSA and pasteurellosis. It is important to understand that any dog, regardless of the breed or size, has the potential to become aggressive.

Signs of aggressive behavior in dogs	Possible reasons
Tense muscles/freezing	Assessing a perceived threatening situation
Turning head away	Trying to identify ways to escape threatening situation
Moving away	Trying to remove or escape from threatening situation
Barking	A warning to stay away
Snarling	A warning to stay away or an attack will occur
Growling	A warning the dog is unhappy about something
Ears held back against head	Unsure of what to do, analyzing their situation and planning their next move
Lunging/charging	Defensive maneuver to scare threat or if threat continues attack will soon follow
Raised hackles	A fight-or-flight response to a perceived threat by making the dog appear larger and more intimidating

Guidance

General animal safety considerations for home healthcare workers:

- When initially evaluating a client for home healthcare treatment, make note of animals in the home and review any available vaccination records
- Look for “Beware of Dog” signs when approaching a client’s home
- Survey the property for stray pets roaming the client’s property
- Avoid contact with the client’s pets, if possible
- Look for cats or dogs in areas you will walk through or work in to avoid tripping over them
- Ask the client or a family member to put animal in a separate room during the home visit
- If a dog approaches, stay still until the dog has moved away

Observing and recognizing aggressive behavior can be a key step in avoiding harm by an animal. Avoiding behaviors where an animal may instinctively become aggressive or agitated is another step. Here are some do’s and don’ts for the home healthcare worker to consider when interacting with animals.

Do...	Don’t...
Ask for permission before petting someone else’s animal	Put your face close to an animal’s mouth or head
Leave nursing animals alone	Scream or make loud noises
Play safe games with an animal	Run away from a dog (do stand like a tree)
Put your hand out slowly for a dog or cat to sniff	Approach an animal that is tethered or confined
Stay away from animals that may be injured or hurt	Approach a dog that is sleeping/eating/chewing
Behave calmly around animals	Look straight into an animal’s eyes
Approach an animal only if they are awake	Hit or poke an animal
Respect an animal’s resting place	Approach an unfamiliar dog
Put ANYTHING between you and an aggressive animal (backpack, jacket, purse, etc.)	Approach a dog straight on with intimidating body language
Stand like a tree if a dog gets too excited/becomes aggressive	

Practices to consider when any animal bites:

- Immediately wash wound thoroughly with plenty of soap and water
- Run water over the wound area for several minutes
- Wash with iodine, Betadine® or other antiseptic solution
- Apply pressure with sterile gauze or clean cloth if wound is bleeding
- Apply antibiotic ointment
- If wound is severe or the person is at high risk of infection, seek medical attention at once
- Observe wound as it heals; if it becomes swollen, red and/or painful, seek medical attention immediately

Conclusion

Home healthcare workers treating clients in the home setting should always beware of both domesticated and wild animals, particularly dogs and cats, when going to/inside a client's home to provide healthcare. Recognizing the signs of aggression and understanding what to do when bitten can be important factors in preventing potentially serious on-the-job injuries.

References

1. "Cats." Healthy Pets, Healthy People. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2019. www.cdc.gov/healthypets/pets/cats.html.
2. "Preventing Dog Bites." Injury, Violence and Safety. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2019. www.cdc.gov/features/dog-bite-prevention.

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A1-112012458-A (07/19) 112012458

