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Biting dogs pose serious threat to children

By Sharise M. Darby
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

A dog is a man's best friend, but it can also be a child's biggest threat. There are more than 4.5 million dog bites a year in the United States, and over half of those involve children, said Dr. West Hamryka, a veterinarian in Gwinnett County.

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A study conducted by pediatric otolaryngologists from the University at Buffalo's School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences found that children were more susceptible to dog bites during the summer months, and dogs were more inclined to bite a child in the head or neck area. The authors of the study analyzed dog biting injuries involving children who were treated at the Women and Children's hospital in Buffalo

between 1999 and 2007.

Dr. Debra Houry, a practicing physician and director of the Emory Center for Injury Control, said she is not surprised by the study's findings. Children are more likely to be bitten in the head or neck area because of their small stature, she said.

"And during the summer months kids are outside more with the dogs," Houry said. "When it is hot kids are outside running around more and being more active."

According to the study, released this spring, the authors identified 84 children who had suffered head and neck bites throughout this eight-year period. Results showed the average age of the injured children was six. One-third of the bites occurred on the cheeks, 21 percent on the lips, and eight percent on the nose and ears.

Around 40 percent of the total injuries had to be repaired in the operating room under general anesthesia, and 64 percent of the patients suffered more than one facial wound. The study also found that most of the injuries occurred during warmer ambient temperatures and 27 percent of the injuries were caused by family pets. Pit bull terriers were the breed most commonly reported as the attacker.

Dr. Philomena M. Behar, UB clinical assistant professor of otolaryngology and the study's corresponding author, said she hopes this information will be used to raise awareness.

"We want to increase the general public's awareness of the significant frequency of these injuries to small children," Behar said. "We also want to alert health care workers of the importance of documentation of the circumstances surrounding the injuries to hopefully... promote prevention and assist in treating patients in the future."

Dr. Hamryka feels there is a solution to this problem. He said it is important to make sure children are supervised whenever they are around dogs, and it is important for parents to teach children how to interact with pets. He also suggests that dog owners do their part by making sure their dog is socialized, which would help minimize the risk of an attack.

"Dogs who are never around children are more likely to react in a negative way," Hamryka said. "The combination of a well socialized dog and a child who knows how to approach a dog presents very little danger."

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