



DOG Watch

Expert information on medicine, behavior and health from a world leader in veterinary medicine

Vol. 18, No. 9 ♦ September 2014

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Research shows that we exchange methicillin-resistant MRSA bacteria.

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IN THE NEWS ...

Bladder Cancer Discovery May Lead to an OCT Test

Veterinarians usually don't see bladder cancer cases until the late stages, when dogs are incontinent or unable to urinate. Researchers at Oregon State University hope their identification of 96 proteins indicating the presence of transitional cell carcinoma — the common cause of bladder cancer — will lead to new diagnostic tests for both dogs and humans.

The goal is to help develop an inexpensive over-the-counter urine test that people could use routinely to protect either the health of their pets or themselves, and improve chances the disease can be caught earlier, researchers say. Their findings were reported in *Analytical Chemistry*.

The advanced-stage disease in dogs and humans has a poor prognosis, with average survival time of less than a year. "This is a fairly common cancer in dogs, often as a result of exposure to pesticides, herbicides and poor quality foods; and in humans is closely related to smoking," according to the university. ♦

Shelters' New Challenge: Dentistry

They've begun providing dental care to encourage adoptions and reduce pain, returns and euthanasia

If you visit a shelter to adopt a dog, you may be surprised to learn that some animals have received dental treatment. In a new and growing movement among shelters, veterinarians and supervised technicians are cleaning teeth, extracting fractured ones and treating inflammation of the gums to boost dogs' chances of winning permanent homes.

"We've found that dental issues in middle-



Dental problems in middle-aged or older dogs can be barriers to adoption.

aged or older dogs can block their ability to be adopted due to the costs to the new owner in correcting those problems," says Elizabeth Berliner, DVM, ABVP, the Janet L. Swanson Director of Maddie's Shelter Medicine Program at Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine. "For decades, the focus of shelter medicine has been to address low-cost ways to spay and neuter and contend with overpopulation. We have worked hard to develop high-quality, high-volume techniques to enable us to spay

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What's Your Dog's Age in Human Years?

If he's a senior, it's time for twice-annual visits to the veterinarian for earlier treatment of any problem

If there were an AARP for pets, your big dog would get his membership card on his 7th birthday. That's about 50 in people years, according to the American Veterinary Medical Association.

If he's reached age 10, that's roughly 66 in human years. The bigger he is, the older he is. A very large dog at age 10 is about 78 — far into seniorhood. Basically, dogs enter their senior years when they reach the last quarter of their expected lifespan, according to the American Animal Hospital Association's Senior Care Guidelines.

They Age Faster. Seniorhood is the time to start visiting a veterinarian twice a year, if

your dog doesn't do so already. "The most important reason is that cats and dogs age faster than people so it is more important to catch problems sooner — intervention can occur earlier," says Brian Collins, DVM, a lecturer in the Community Practice Service at Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine.

"I will recommend even more frequent visits in some situations, particularly for owners who are interested in close monitoring of chronic disease conditions," Dr. Collins says.

Some older dogs may appear fine but actually aren't upon veterinary inspection. "I recently found bilateral thyroid tumors on an 8-year-old Labrador Retriever on a routine

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SHORT TAKES

Companion Animals and Humans Harbor MRSA

Dogs, cats and people can harbor the same strains of contagious, potentially dangerous *methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA), according to research published in the journal *mBio* from the American Society for Microbiology. *Staphylococcus aureus* bacteria can cause difficult-to-treat infections in all three species.

The study demonstrates that humans and companion animals can exchange MRSA bacteria, advancing the view that pathogens infecting both humans and animals may be intrinsically linked, say University of Cambridge researchers.

They sequenced genomes of 46 MRSA samples from cats and dogs and found samples were similar to those associated with MRSA strains in humans. Most were from wound infections or skin and soft tissue infections.

The animal bacteria most likely originated in humans, but researchers say there is no cause for alarm: *Staphylococcus aureus* infections in cats and dogs are rare, and owners and healthy pets have little risk contracting staph from each other. However, an owner with an infection should inform their pet's veterinarian.

Most Common Illnesses

Skin allergies topped the list of the most common medical claims for dogs that Veterinary Pet Insurance received last year. The company sorted its database of more than 500,000 insured pets to find more than 77,000 claims for canine skin allergies, with an average cost per dog of \$187. The most expensive canine claim on the list was for non-cancerous skin masses at an average cost of \$342.

The top conditions in dogs:

1. Skin allergies
2. Ear infections
3. Non-cancerous skin mass
4. Skin infection
5. Arthritis
6. Upset stomach/vomiting
7. Intestinal upset/diarrhea
8. Periodontitis (dental disease)
9. Bladder or urinary tract disease
10. Soft tissue injury (bruising)

Understanding Epilepsy

Despite seizure-related syndromes being the most common neurological disorder in dogs — affecting 5 percent the canine population — drugs today provide relief to only half of them, according to the AKC Canine Health Foundation. In addition, it says, “Current treatment options carry possible negative side effects.”

In an effort to identify new drugs for treatment, better understand the disease's predisposition in certain breeds and more accurately classify it, the foundation has launched the Epilepsy Research Initiative.

“While human epilepsy is sometimes used to describe canine seizures,” it says, “the classifications aren't always clearly applicable to dogs.”

The CHF is reviewing grant proposals and will announce awards to researchers later this year. A number of breed clubs have already pledged financial support, including the Collie Health Foundation, Giant Schnauzer Club

of America, American Cavalier King Charles Spaniel Club Charitable Trust, Keeshond Club of America, Alaskan Malamute Club of America, Australian Shepherd Foundation and Australian Shepherd Health & Genetics Institute.

The CHF has extensive information on the disease in a peer-reviewed white paper “Understanding Canine Epilepsy” at www.akc-chf.org (keyword, epilepsy initiative). It covers terminology, diagnosis, medical management, genetics and current research, among other topics. It also has advice on “What to Do If Your Dog Has a Seizure” and a free, downloadable seizure diary to help owners monitor the disease and work with their dog's veterinarian. ❖

For more information, please see “The Most Common Neurological Disease” in the January 2013 issue of DogWatch.



BIGSTOCK

The Australian Shepherd Foundation and Australian Shepherd Health & Genetics Institute are among organizations supporting the Epilepsy Research Initiative. The lively, hard-working Aussie is among many breeds predisposed to the disease.

Three Little-known Halloween Hazards

Don't overlook raisins, glow sticks and the sugar substitute xylitol — all can cause illness

Halloween poses well-known safety risks and stressors for our dogs, from tempting chocolate to ringing doorbells. But there are at least three other threats we may overlook: gum and candy containing the sugar substitute xylitol, glow sticks and little boxes of raisins passed out to trick-or-treaters.

"Some dogs can be in real trouble within minutes or an hour of ingesting the sugar-free gum," says Gretchen Schoeffler, DVM, Section Chief of Emergency Medicine and Critical Care Services at Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine. "Because of this, I tell all my visiting friends not to bring in purses that contain sugar-free gum or mints. I live with two older dogs and I want to keep them safe."

Dramatic Effects. Xylitol can potentially cause hypoglycemia and hepatic necrosis. Hypoglycemia occurs when the pancreas mistakenly releases a rush of insulin to remove what it perceives to be real sugar. Blood sugar levels plunge, causing weakness, staggering, confusion and possible seizures and death. Xylitol can also destroy liver tissue,

resulting in complete and sudden liver failure and death.

"We don't fully understand all of the mechanisms of xylitol toxicity in dogs, but we do know that dogs can be indiscriminate eaters," Dr. Schoeffler says. "Please go through your child's Halloween bag and remove items of concern for pets — sugar-free items containing xylitol, chocolate candy and raisins or candies containing raisins. You don't want to spend Halloween night at the emergency veterinary clinic."

Low Toxicity. Glow sticks are bright plastic tubes children carry outdoors at night. The ASPCA says, that although the luminescent liquid inside the stick and glow-in-the-dark jewelry might look poisonous, "the relatively small quantity of fluid generally has a low potential for toxicity" if pets break open the tubes. The fluid is dibutyl phthalate used in plastic and other products.

"Based on our experience," the ASPCA says, "most animals who have chewed on glow jewelry have exhibited signs such as profuse drooling, hyperactivity, agitation and/or aggressive behavior."



BIGSTOCK

If your dog enjoys costumes, make sure his allows him to move easily unlike this outfit.

The effects are short term, however, and usually only a response to the liquid's bitter taste. A small offering of soft pet food can help dissipate the taste, and a quick wash with mild soap and water will clean any residue on the skin.

Kidney Failure. Raisins, which are dried grapes, can result in more serious effects — grapes, too — even in small amounts. Both can cause kidney failure in dogs. "The toxic principle remains unknown, and which dog who will suffer the consequences also remains unknown," Dr. Schoeffler says. "Ingestion of any quantity should be cause for alarm and immediate veterinary care, as the prognosis is much better if treatment is instituted early rather than waiting until the animal shows signs of illness."

Depending on the timing, the veterinarian may administer a drug (apomorphine) to make the dog vomit. Treatment can also call for hospitalization, intravenous fluid therapy, blood work and urinalysis to assess kidney function.

Reconsider Costumes

Some outgoing dogs are natural-born clothes hounds who love the attention they get wearing a Halloween costume. Others, not so much. "You need to pay attention to your pet's body cues and respect him if he displays any abnormal behavior signs while in a costume, such as panting, pacing and pawing at the costume," Dr. Schoeffler says.

If your dog enjoys costumes, make sure his still allows him to move easily, *(continued on bottom of page 5)*

PROTECTING YOUR DOG

Two essential items should be readily available to you in a pet emergency: the phone number of the nearest 24-hour veterinary clinic and a bottle of hydrogen peroxide.

"When you recognize that your dog ingested something that might be toxic, minutes count," says Dr. Schoeffler. "You need to contact a veterinarian at a nearby emergency clinic or a veterinary toxicologist at the ASPCA animal poison control hotline (888-426-4435). Depending on what your dog ingested, they may instruct you how to induce vomiting with hydrogen peroxide before getting the dog to the nearest veterinary clinic, especially if you live more than 20 minutes away."

Veterinary clinics may have a drug called apomorphine available to induce vomiting. It will more reliably make a dog vomit but is available only at the veterinarian's office.

SENIOR...

(continued from the cover)

physical exam," Dr. Collins says of a dog with no obvious outward symptoms.

"These tumors can be very malignant, but early detection led to a successful

surgery to remove them. The dog may now have a normal lifespan."

Your dog's veterinarian will look over your senior dog closely and, if necessary, order laboratory test and imaging to detect disease. Here's what to expect:

A Thorough History

Purpose: It's just as important as the physical exam to determine overall health.

Essentials: You'll be asked if you have observed any changes in your dog's behavior that suggest senility or decreased vision and hearing. Any changes in eating or drinking habits, urination or defecation? Coughing, sneezing, vomiting, diarrhea?

Dogs with osteoarthritis, which can be eased with medication and



Big dogs age rapidly, with those 7 years old equivalent to about 50 in human years. At 15 years of age, they're 93.

diet, seem less willing to climb stairs or run and may sleep more, so you'll be asked: Is your dog less active? Does he seem to have problems with mobility or pain? Has his lifestyle changed? Perhaps he's moved from a rural home to an urban setting. "We have to see if anything has changed since the last visit," Dr. Collins says.

The Physical

Purpose: determine overall health via a thorough exam from nose to tail.

Essentials: Veterinarians look for acquired health problems, carefully feeling the abdomen to check for masses and checking the rectum for clues to incontinence and cancer. Some cancers are easily misdiagnosed

or overlooked early on, according to AAHA's senior guidelines, which advise veterinarians to keep a lookout for common conditions such as osteosarcoma (causing lameness) and squamous cell carcinoma (appearing as nail bed disease).

Common problems for seniors include skin lumps (both benign and malignant) and lameness due to arthritis or neurologic diseases, Dr. Collins says. Veterinarians use a stethoscope to listen to check the lungs and heart. "We look carefully at eyes for changes that can threaten vision or give clues to other diseases," Dr. Collins says.

Nutrition

Purpose: determine if your dog is at a healthy weight and on an appropriate diet.

Essentials: Is your senior dogs overweight, a risk factor for arthritis? The veterinarian might provide diet advice tailored to his needs. If, for example, your dog has chronic kidney disease, a lower-protein diet such as a therapeutic renal diet could lengthen his life.

Blood Work

Purpose: detect health problems.

Essentials: Veterinarians often recommend a complete blood count to evaluate blood cells and a chemistry panel to check organ function. Additional tests may be ordered based on initial test results and/or abnormalities you report.

The findings sometimes can surprise. Maybe you've written off your dog's lethargy and lessened activity as signs that he's aging, but, in fact, a thyroid test may reveal hypothyroidism. It's common in older dogs, and they

AGE DEPENDS ON SIZE, AMONG OTHER FACTORS

You may have heard that determining a dog's age in human years is as simple as multiplying his age by seven. But that's not true. Age varies by size, among other factors.

Here are more accurate equivalents, according to the American Veterinary Medical Association, which recommends that you check with your dog's veterinarian about his actual age.

Note: Small dogs are under 20 pounds. Medium-sized are 21 to 50 pounds. Large dogs are up to 90 pounds.

SMALL and MEDIUM DOGS	
Actual Age	Age in Human Years
Age 7	44-47
Age 10	56-60
Age 15	76-83
Age 20	96-105

LARGE DOGS	
Actual Age	Age in Human Years
Age 7	50
Age 10	66
Age 15	93
Age 20	120

Source: "Senior Pet Care (FAQ)" at AVMA.org

regain a spring in their step upon taking inexpensive daily medication.

X-rays and Ultrasound Exams

Purpose: detect health problems.

Essentials: Veterinarians often recommend X-rays to evaluate the heart and lungs, or ultrasound to more thoroughly evaluate the abdomen. X-rays also may help determine the causes of lameness.

Oral Exam

Purpose: check for dental disease. Most dogs have signs of periodontal disease by age 3, often evident with bad breath. "Professional dental cleaning and periodontal therapy often come too late to prevent extensive disease or to save teeth," the American Veterinary Dental College says, adding that multiple problems in the oral cavity can result and may be associated with damage to internal organs in some patients as they age.



Seniors still need core vaccines, especially since their immune systems are less able to fight off disease.

Essentials: The veterinarian will look for oral tumors and signs of problems that bring pain or make eating difficult.

Vaccinations

Purpose: protect against potentially deadly diseases.

Essentials: Seniors still need core vaccines, especially since their immune systems are less able to fight off disease. One vaccine guards against rabies; others protect against parvovirus, distemper and canine hepatitis. Depending on your

dog's risk of exposure, he may also need vaccination against such diseases as Bordetella bronchiseptica, known as kennel cough and required by boarding kennels.

Behavior Screening

Purpose: help determine quality of life and overall health.

Essentials: Does your dog seem confused, more irritable, less responsive to commands, more anxious and withdrawn from people? These are among changes that may be seen as pets age, so tell his veterinarian. While you may be tempted to dismiss cognitive dysfunction as an accompaniment to old age, medication and special diet can often help manage it.

In fact, don't write off any subtle changes simply to old age. Chances are that medication, other treatment or even household changes can go a long way toward resolving health problems and making your dog healthier and happier. You may find yourself wondering: why didn't I take him to see a vet sooner? ♦

SAFETY

HALLOWEEN... (continued from page 3)

doesn't cover his face or ears and has no small parts that he can ingest. Better yet, treat him to a Halloween-themed collar with an identification tag. And make sure he has been microchipped with your contact information.

Go Easy on Decorations

Instead of burning candles, Dr. Schoeffler recommends battery-operated ones. "While some curious pets will burn themselves with the flame or hot wax, the bigger concern is if the candle is knocked over and starts a house fire," Dr. Schoeffler says.

Check Those Treat Bags

Dogs are highly sensitive to caffeine-like substances. The darker the chocolate, the greater the amount of caffeine and a chemical called theobromine it contains. The impact on dogs depends on their size and health. Symptoms of

chocolate poisoning include vomiting, diarrhea, tremors, accelerated heart rates, seizure, respiratory failure and, possibly, death.

Lollipops and their sticks can be choking hazards and cause a painful obstruction, as can plastic-wrapped candies.

Dog-proof Decorations

Reconsider using pumpkins and corn as decorations. They can produce stomach upset if pets ingest them. And keep wires and cords on electric lights out of reach to avoid burns and electrical shock.

Tone Down the Parade

Seeing costumed strangers appear at the open door can unsettle dogs and accelerate their instinct to guard the home. Before the evening festivities begin, usher your dog into a bedroom or another room away from the party scene.

Treat him to plenty of amenities: a comfy bed, food and water bowls, a

favorite toy. Mute the holiday noise by turning on the television or radio and close the door. This offers two benefits: you know where your dog is at all times, and you avoid his darting out the front door and becoming lost or struck by a car.

It should go without saying but we will: Don't leave your dog in the yard on Halloween, even in the afternoon. He could be vulnerable to pranksters, teasing children or worse.

If Panic Persisted in the Past

"If you know that Halloween can cause anxiety or panic in your dog, take precautions by talking with your dog's veterinarian ahead of time," says Dr. Schoeffler. "Depending on the situation, the veterinarian may prescribe anti-anxiety medication."

Also, ask about the use of over-the-counter products containing calming scents for your dog, such as Adaptil or Rescue Remedy. ♦

DENTAL...*(cont. from cover)*
and neuter safely and quickly."

Dental treatment is the new challenge. "Periodontal disease contributes to infection, illness and discomfort in our companion animals," Dr. Berliner says. "Equipment is expensive and dental procedures can take hours. By having veterinary dentists and shelter veterinarians working together, improved dental care could be the ticket to getting homes for more shelter animals."

Earlier this year, veterinary dentist Tony Woodwood, DVM, AVDC, at Animal Dental Care and Oral Surgery, presented a free, two-day training session for 16 shelter personnel at his veterinary dental training center in



Paco, a 6-year-old Pit Bull, undergoes extractions at the Humane Society of the Pikes Peak Region in Colorado Springs. At right, after the procedure, he was adopted. Dental care has made it possible to find homes for animals who otherwise not be adoption candidates because of the extensive dental work they needed, says Julie Crosby, veterinary services manager. "This has certainly had a direct impact on the number of lives we have been able to save."

Colorado Springs. "I did a similar training event for the Toronto Humane Society 18 months ago, and they reported decreased return rates on adoption on those patients who had their mouths cleaned before adoption," he says.

At this point, dental procedures generally are limited at shelters and are usually performed by shelter or general practice veterinarians and their technicians due

to the costs. "Most shelters are unable to utilize specialists for this work, as there are few, if any, in many communities, and they can be cost prohibitive," Dr. Berliner says. "A shelter animal is more likely to have a diseased tooth extracted than to have endodontic work done."

The Humane Society of Boulder Valley, Colo., which cares for 9,000 animals annually with a 93 percent success rate of adopting or reuniting them with owners, is one of the pioneers in shelter dental care.

EXPANDING STRATEGIES TO FINDING LOST DOGS

In addition to dentistry, another crucial issue facing shelters is finding ways to reunite lost dogs with their owners. Elizabeth Berliner, DVM, ABVP, at Cornell shares the successful examples set by the Marin Humane Society in Novato, Calif.:

- ◆ Using homeowner associations to email residents about lost or found pets in their neighborhood.
- ◆ Identifying animal-related businesses willing to post found pet fliers in their stores.
- ◆ Asking religious groups to get the word out.
- ◆ Partnering with community newspapers to highlight found and injured companion animals.
- ◆ Taking high-quality photos of found animals, including detailed descriptions where the animal was found.

LOST DOG



Female lab mix, 10 years old, tan with white chest and paws. Lost on Tuesday, April 20, near the corner of Windsor and Washington St. Very friendly.

555-5555

Continued Pain. "We realized for many years that dental disease can be a strong deterrent to adoption or create problems post-adoption when the adopter takes their new pet to the veterinarian for an exam and walks out with a \$1,000-plus estimate," says Chief Veterinarian Lesli Groshong, DVM. "Nobody wins and the pet may continue to be in oral pain. The pet is unlikely to have the procedure done and may be returned to the shelter where it is likely to be euthanized."

The society's preliminary reports indicate that last year 70 cats and 60 dogs had major dental procedures there and about 75 had simple extractions, according to Dr. Groshong. "Not included are animals that were adopted and then had the dental done — usually because there can be a long wait before a dental can be done so we frequently elect to allow the adoption to be completed and then the pet returns to our public practice for the dental as an owned animal with the shelter covering the cost." (The nonprofit

society operates a public veterinary practice that helps support its work.)

The most common dental problem she sees in dogs is tartar buildup in small breeds. Animals with tartar and/or gingivitis (gum inflammation) but no painful, abscessed or mobile teeth get a medical disclosure accompanying their adoption stating the pet has dental disease that will likely need treatment from their veterinarian.

The shelter's board of directors pressed for "zero euthanasia of adoptable animals" about 15 years ago, Dr. Groshong says. "We were beginning to place more

older but otherwise healthy animals for adoption and hearing from adopters about the high cost of dental care. We had a simple dental scaler and I began to extract more and more teeth."

Improving Efficiency. She took Dr. Woodward's continuing education dental course a decade ago to improve her speed and efficiency in extractions. A veterinarian or certified veterinary technician spends two hours or more on a dental procedure, Dr. Groshong says. "In that time, 12 to 14 spay/neuter surgeries could be completed. The veterinarian



A veterinarian or certified veterinary technician spends two hours on a dental procedure, says Leslie Groshong, DVM, chief veterinarian at the Humane Society of Boulder Valley. "In that time, 12 to 14 spay/neuter surgeries could be completed."

SHELTER MEDICINE ON THE WAY TO CERTIFICATION

More than 4,500 animal shelters operate in the United States, with staff and volunteers caring for between 6 and 8 million dogs and cats each year. After nearly a decade of effort led by the Association of Shelter Veterinarians, the American Veterinary Medical Association is in the process of approving board certification in shelter medicine practice.

Veterinarians will have two routes to pursue for certification: enrolling in a two- or three-year residency training program or selecting a practitioner path for those with six years or more experience in practicing shelter medicine. Shelter veterinarians face diverse duties, including knowledge of infectious disease, animal behavior, public health, veterinary forensics, immunology, animal law, companion animal population management, epidemiology and sanitation.

Cornell offered the first formal course in shelter medicine in 1999. Its comprehensive shelter medicine program as well as those at other veterinary colleges and the efforts of Maddie's Fund are credited with demonstrating the need for certification in the field.

Maddie's Fund is a charitable foundation that has awarded more than \$96 million to animal welfare organizations and veterinary schools since it began in 1999. Its goal is to create a "no-kill nation" where all healthy animals are guaranteed placement in permanent homes.

Cornell continues its work in outreach education with the ASPCA Cornell Maddie's Shelter Medicine Conference held on campus each summer. This year, more than 350 veterinarians, technicians, assistants, shelter staff, volunteers, board members and members of the public heard updates on training and emotional support for humane euthanasia; dentistry; infectious diseases such as parasites and upper respiratory disease; pet first aid, including new protocols in administering cardiopulmonary resuscitation; and legal issues such as pet store puppy sales, breed-restriction laws and shelter access laws.

Heartworm treatment and prevention options were also addressed because the disease, which is widespread in the South, impacts Northern shelters when they take in animals displaced floods, hurricanes and other natural disasters in Southern states.

could perform a dozen complete physical exams and enter medical notes. The time and expense of performing dentals is huge burden on shelters."

The clinic manages its staff to treat three or four animals requiring major dental care weekly, Dr. Groshong says. The sad truth at Boulder and many shelters across the country: "If we didn't have the resources to perform dental procedures on the dogs and cats with severe dental disease, they would be euthanized rather than allowing a chronic painful condition to go untreated. Because of the expense of dentistry, it is rare to find people who are willing to adopt animals with severe dental disease even if intervention will be curative." ♦

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Maddie's Shelter Medicine Program at Cornell University provides resources for veterinarians, animal shelter staff and pet owners at www.sheltermedicine.vet.cornell.edu. The program conducts research and offers consultations in person, by phone (607-253-3349), and by email at sheltermedicine@cornell.edu.



Katherine A. Houpt, VMD, Ph.D., here with her Cairn Terrier, Denver, provided the answer on this page. Dr. Houpt is a diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists and emeritus professor at Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine.

Please Share Your Questions

We welcome questions of general interest on health, medicine and behavior. We regret however, that we cannot comment on specific products and prior diagnoses. Please send correspondence to:

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COMING UP ...

**EXCESSIVE
LICKING**



**SUBTLE SIGNS
OF ILLNESS**



**MAST CELL
TUMORS**



**WHEN TO SAY
GOODBYE**

How Can She Overcome Her Chihuahua's Terror of Children?

Q I have an 18-month-old Chihuahua I adopted from a rescue group. Based on his early behavior, such as cowering when I tried to pet him and being generally nervous, his veterinarian and I suspect he was abused. It's taken time for him to relax in his new home and meet people and other dogs on our walks.

The problem is, he seems terrified of small children — school kids under 10. If he sees them when he's in the car, he'll plaster himself against the window and bark and whine. If he sees groups of them, he'll bark but gives them a wide berth. How can I help him overcome this fear? I have no children at home.

A You were very kind to adopt a Chihuahua. Many, many Chihuahuas are in shelters, especially in the West. I personally enjoy Chihuahuas because they are surprisingly good trail dogs. A long-haired black Chihuahua, Annie, follows my friend and me as we ride our horses on long trail rides during which she takes the opportunity to hunt, leaping like a jackal with extended forelegs onto unsuspecting prey, always unsuccessfully.

Your dog may have been abused, but small dogs like her are so small in comparison to humans they naturally are fearful with no history of abuse. Chihuahuas are the second mostly likely breed to bite, according to a large survey from the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine (my alma mater). Miniature Dachshunds are the most likely to bite and both breeds share the characteristic of being very small.

It's also true many dogs, no matter what their size, are afraid of children and, unfortunately, this is often accompanied by aggression. Why? Well, children are natural agitators. They tend to wave their arms and move quickly, often in a jerky fashion. They have irritating, high-pitched voices and smell like milk and graham crackers (or Tang and Pop-Tarts). Worst of all, they are unpredictable.

All these qualities make them objects to be feared. Unfortunately, if barking and growling do not succeed in driving the children away, the dog may resort to biting. The question is what can we do to make your little dog less fearful of children?

He should be desensitized to them. It would be quicker but more dangerous if you had children at home, but, on the other hand, he might be overcome by too many fear-producing stimuli. What you can do is take your dog to a place with children. Walk up to them until he begins to show signs of fear.

Signs include shaking, piloerection (hair on his back standing on end), whites of his eyes showing, ears pinned back and tucking his tail. If you see any of these, stop. Next take the dog a little farther away. You want him beyond the distance where he shows fear. Then begin obedience with him — just sit and stay and down and look at you — for a few minutes, rewarding each proper response with a little bit of food, a tiny piece like one kibble so he will not become satiated too quickly.

Once that goes smoothly — he does what you say and shows no sign of anxiety — move a little closer to the children. Continue to work with him, rewarding him for good behavior in their presence. Do this until you can be within 10 feet of children, but he no longer shows signs of fear. His response may be location-specific, however, so work with him in different areas to be sure he has generalized the behavior to all children.

You can deal with problems in the car more passively. Put him in an airline crate in the car, so he cannot see out or have him restrained with a seatbelt — all dogs should have seatbelts when they're in the car — but block his visual access to the outside. You can put up curtains in the car or window film on the rear windows so he does not notice children outside. Be sure you can still see.

You may find watching children on television — maybe Sesame Street — while he's having his dinner will help him associate the sight and sound of little ones with good things. If necessary, his veterinarian can prescribe anti-anxiety medication to help allay his fears. ❖

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