

DOG Watch

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

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Lucky does whatever, whenever, and that can sometimes include biting.

IN THE NEWS ...

The 'Fat Gap' Continues, But Owners Don't See It

Slimming down obese dogs to a healthy weight shows no signs of progress nor of significant owner recognition of the problem, according to the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention. Its 2012 survey of veterinary assessments found that 52.5 percent of dogs were overweight or obese. Results of a 2013 survey of 1,421 assessments released this year found 52.6 percent were still in the same shape.

Even more distressing, in what the association describes as a "fat gap," 93 percent of owners with dogs deemed obese believed they were of normal weight. And despite 72 percent of the owners' acknowledging obesity can lead to shortened life spans in dogs, 42 percent said they didn't know what healthy weight looked like in their pets. (See the body chart in "Facing a Hard Fact: Our Dogs Are Fat," *DogWatch*, April 2014.)

The association calls pet obesity an epidemic, linked to osteoarthritis, diabetes, heart disease, joint injuries and cancer. ♦

The No. 1 Reason for Aggression

Fear can cause dogs to go on the attack, especially when they feel threatened and have no way of escape

Aggression is the most common and most serious canine behavior problem animal behaviorists encounter, according to the ASPCA. It can result in threats or injury to people, cats, other dogs and animals.

Contrary to popular opinion, however, most aggression in dogs is defensive, intended to put distance between them and their targets, says Ilana Reisner, DVM, of Media, Penn., who completed her residency and Ph.D.



Looking away or flicking the tongue is intended to calm a frightening individual. Baring the teeth is the next step.

at Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine.

It's Self-defensive.

"Any fearful animal will try to get away first, and his response will be worse if there's no escape — for instance, if he's cornered, indoors or on leash," says Dr. Reisner, one of only 62 board-certified by the

American College of Veterinary Behaviorists. She adds fear-related aggression can appear

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We Know Chocolate Can Be Toxic

~~But sugar-free gum and marijuana-laced cookies?~~
They're among growing risks to pets' health

Today many dog owners know to keep chocolate out of paws' reach, but two other serious health threats have recently emerged: marijuana-laced cookies and sugar-free chewing gum.

"Since the legalization of marijuana in some states like Colorado, we have seen an overabundance in the increase of animals who ingest edible products made with THC oil," says Elisa Mazzaferro, DVM, Ph.D., ACVECC, a specialist in emergency and critical care at Cornell University Veterinary Specialists in Stamford, Conn. "THC [tetrahydrocannabinoid] is the active toxic ingredient in marijuana."

Increased Toxicosis. Dr. Mazzaferro, who spent more than a decade at an emergency and critical care practice in Colorado, where recreational and medical use of marijuana is now legal, is concerned about its impact on dogs' safety. She participated in a study published in the *Journal of Emergency and Critical Care* that found a significant correlation between the increased number of medical marijuana licenses and marijuana toxicosis in dogs in Colorado.

Researchers evaluated 125 dogs known or suspected of suffering marijuana toxicosis from January 2005 to October 2010 in cases at two hospitals — a private specialty

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FEAR ... (continued from the cover)

to be an offensive reaction but is actually proactive self-defense.

While some people say dogs attack without warning, it's a rarity. If they have an opportunity, dogs warn they're afraid. Their body language expresses their feelings. For instance, they may initially look away, lower their bodies and flick their tongues — intended to appease or calm the threatening individual. If that isn't effective, they may threaten aggression by flattening their ears, baring teeth, barking and lunging.

Pain from unrecognized medical conditions can also cause dogs to lash out. Other common triggers include:

- ◆ Strangers in the home or the approach of unknown people or dogs outside the home, especially if unexpected. Dogs may also react to unintentionally threatening body language, such as facing him with direct eye contact, Dr. Reisner says, as well as interactions humans would consider friendly, such as reaching to pet a fearful dog.

BACK OFF FROM THESE TELLTALE SIGNS

If you know what to look for, it's easy to recognize a fearful dog through body language. Typical signs include:

- ◆ A stiff, still body
- ◆ Low, threatening bark
- ◆ Growls, snapping, nipping and biting, or a tightly closed mouth
- ◆ Lowered tail
- ◆ Head turned away

As the threat increases, the dog's response escalates. Your best recourse: Back off without turning around. And if the problem continues, consult a veterinary behaviorist for expert help.

- ◆ Stressful environments, such as animal shelters or boarding kennels.
- ◆ Men and women in uniform, such as police officers and delivery drivers. "My brother's Australian Shepherd, Emma, is terrified of uniforms," says Jill Fisher Gibbs of Billings, Mont. "My brother is a paramedic and Emma is afraid of him when he comes home in uniform. When he changes clothes, she is just fine."

- ◆ Uncomfortable situations such as grooming or veterinary visits. Perri, a 6-year-old Greyhound, snarls and snaps when her nails are trimmed, even though owner Marcia Herman of Anderson, S.C., has never harmed her in the process. "We got her at 3 months, and she was fine until she turned 6 or 7 months. Then it was like a switch turned on. It takes one person to hold her and one to do the nails. We muzzle her, too."
- ◆ Skateboards, bicycles and other startling, noisy and fast-moving stimuli.
- ◆ Young children who move quickly and impulsively, or touch them inappropriately — pulling their ears or tail or trying to ride them. Some children may put their face up to a dog's, perhaps offering a kiss, or they lean over his head, reach for his food or toy, or try to crawl into his crate. Parents often think the behavior is endearing, not realizing the danger. According to the Centers for Disease Control, half of the 4.5-million annual dog-bite victims are children. The rate of dog bite-related injuries is highest among children between the ages of 5 and 9 years.

Typically, the common cause of fear reaction is not a bad experience, as you might assume, but anticipation of something bad, Dr. Reisner says. "Often



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Young children who move quickly and impulsively, or touch dogs inappropriately can trigger defensive aggression. Half of the annual 4.5 million dog-bite victims in the U.S. are children.

there is an underlying worry or anxiety, making unfamiliar triggers more frightening. Avoidance and safety are most important, and then desensitization and counter conditioning."

If your dog displays fearful or aggressive behaviors, give him space until he can relax. You don't want him to feel cornered or trapped. Never punish him. Punishment increases fear and can compromise his trust.

Of course, your dog is going to have to have his nails trimmed or encounter strangers at some point. It's unlikely you can completely eliminate fear aggression, but sometimes you can manage it by desensitizing and counterconditioning him to the things that scare him, taking steps to help him feel more comfortable in frightening situations, and if necessary, avoiding those situations.

For example, your dog may be afraid when strangers come to the home. You don't want to stop having guests, so you need to gradually expose your dog to visitors from what he considers a safe distance. When they are in sight but far away, reward him with treats. Food, toys or other counterconditioning devices should come from the person the dog trusts — you — rather than from the scary, unfamiliar person. Continue this every time guests are in the home. Done over a period of time — and it will likely

require multiple practice sessions — your dog will eventually learn to associate guests with his favorite liver snacks and may even begin to welcome visitors.

A Wide Berth. Keep treats in your pocket when you walk your dog. If you see another dog at a distance, walk your dog at a wide berth from the approaching dog (or skateboard or stranger) and keep moving while rewarding him for paying attention to you. With practice, your dog will learn to look to you when he sees something frightening instead of reacting fearfully.

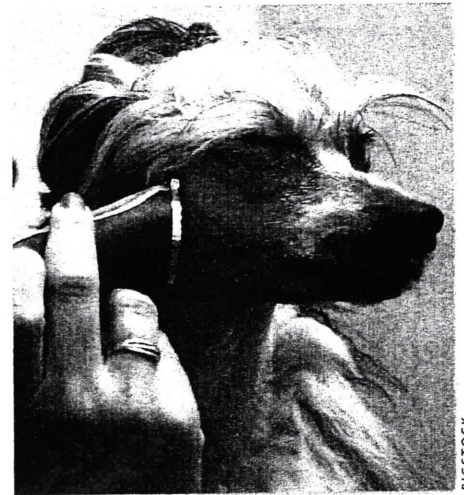
Dogs who are fearful of veterinary visits and travel call for more patience. Marty Becker, DVM, who advises practices on fear-free visits for pets, recommends leaving your dog's travel crate out at home so he becomes used to its pres-

ence and priming it with food, treats and toys. This helps the dog form positive associations with the crate so he's not reluctant to ride in it.

An hour before a car ride or visit to the veterinarian, release calming pheromones in the room where the dog spends the most time and apply them to the crate's interior or bedding. You can buy canine pheromones in the form of sprays or wipes. Dr. Becker also suggests using Thundershirts, tight-fitting garments that calm the dog by providing a constant, gentle "hug."

For dogs who bite or threaten to bite at the veterinary clinic, Dr. Becker recommends using desensitization and counterconditioning to teach them to wear a muzzle.

At the clinic, check in while your dog waits in the car if it isn't a hot day.



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Uncomfortable situations such as grooming and veterinary visits, where dogs feel cornered, can cause them to lash out.

Then wait with him until you can take him straight into the exam room. If you have a small dog in a carrier, instead of letting it hang at your side, hold it as if it contains a valuable and delicate object — which, of course, it does.

Stree-free Rides. Practice car rides long before your dog needs to go anywhere. Start by placing his crate — with him inside — in the car and closing the door. It's best if the crate is on a flat surface so the dog is comfortable. Sit in the car for a few minutes, then take him back indoors. After doing this a few times, move on to starting the engine and then backing down the driveway and back in. Eventually, go around the block or take him to the drive-through to pick up some burgers or a breakfast sandwich. Rewarding him with a bite of beef or egg can go a long way toward enhancing his appreciation of car rides. Take him to the veterinarian for practice visits that involve only petting and treats from the staff, nothing scary or painful.

If your dog's aggression continues and he becomes a threat to you or others, a veterinary exam is warranted to rule out medical conditions and then a consultation with a certified behaviorist. The American College of Veterinary Behaviorists' website lists members by state at www.dacvb.org. ❖

MODIFY THE BEHAVIOR GRADUALLY — WITH TREATS

Socialization is important, but inherited temperament can also be a factor in aggression, says behaviorist Ilana Reisner, DVM. "Obtaining a puppy from a responsible, ethical and experienced breeder who socialized the pup and can assure you the parents are not fearful is a good thing. If a dog is adopted from a shelter or breed rescue, it may be more difficult to predict behavior, but be prepared to address fearfulness if it becomes apparent."

If you do notice fearful behavior in a puppy, Dr. Reisner recommends carefully, gradually exposing the dog to the particular situation, sound or person that evokes the fear and using food rewards to replace the fearful response with an acceptable behavior. This process, known as desensitization and counterconditioning, is integral to modifying behavior.

"The most important issue is learning to recognize fearfulness before aggression is apparent," Dr. Reisner says. "Owners shouldn't force interactions with the person or situation the dog is fearful of but instead work at the dog's pace, again watching the individual dog's body language."



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Inherited temperament can be one predictor of aggression. If the parents aren't fearful, all the better for their offspring.