



Dog Bite Scales

A Review and Comparison



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INTRODUCTION

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I'll never forget the day my dog Chewie bit a child who was playing ball with him. One moment we were all enjoying a game of fetch, the next tears. I can remember the guilt, fear, and confusion that followed like it was yesterday. While the bite was a very small puncture, it was still terrifying because I couldn't stop thinking about what could have happened if the bite was worse.

For months after the incident, I obsessed over every detail. What signs did I miss? Could I have prevented it? After lots of introspection, I realized not only did I miss warning signs, but my failure as his advocate was what caused the escalation to a bite.

If you or a loved one has suffered from a bite, or you have a dog who has bitten, this book is for you. The first step is to understand the severity of the bite. In this book, we will review the two most used dog-to-human bite scales. Next we will preview some of the warning signs of an imminent bite and highlight some prevention tips.

Finally, we will touch on what to do if a bite happens - what information to gather and what to do next.

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Whether you're a bite survivor seeking confidence or a pet parent wanting to prevent future incidents, this guide will give you the tools professionals use to assess dog bites. You'll also get some bonus dog body language information about pre bite warning signs. To learn more about dog body language, visit <https://www.wigglebuttacademy.com/body-language> for free resources on this important topic.

Only Certain Breeds Bite
Reality: Any dog can bite, regardless of breed. Factors like individual temperament, health, socialization, and training play a more significant role than breed alone.

A Dog with a History of Biting Cannot Be Rehabilitated
Reality: With the right approach and expert guidance, many dogs can be taught to feel safer and respond differently.

Dogs Raised with Kids Won't Bite Children
Reality: Even dogs who live with children may bite if they're uncomfortable, frightened, or in pain. Supervision and teaching kids to respect dogs' boundaries are crucial.

A Wagging Tail Means the Dog is Friendly
Reality: Tail wagging doesn't always signal friendliness. Dogs may wag their tails when they are anxious, fearful, or even agitated.

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MYTHS ABOUT
DOG BITES

Dog bite myths can be harmful, so understanding the truth is key to preventing incidents.



Biting is a Sign of a "Bad" or "Aggressive" Dog
Reality: Biting is often a response to fear, pain, or feeling trapped. It doesn't necessarily reflect an inherently aggressive or "bad" dog.

Dogs That Bite Are Abused or Neglected
Reality: While abuse and neglect can lead to biting, well-cared-for and loved dogs may also bite due to fear, confusion, or pain.

Dogs Bite Out of the Blue
Reality: Dogs usually exhibit subtle warning signs before biting, such as stiffening, lip licking, yawning, or avoiding eye contact. Recognizing these signs can help prevent incidents.

A Dog Will Always Give Warning Before Biting
Reality: Some dogs may skip warning signs if they feel intensely threatened, especially if they have been punished in the past for growling or showing discomfort.

Only Large Dogs Cause Serious Bites
Reality: Small dogs can also cause significant injury, especially to young children or vulnerable individuals. Size doesn't dictate potential for harm.

If a Dog Bites Once, It Will Always Be Dangerous
Reality: Many factors contribute to a bite incident. With behavior modification, management, and proper training, many dogs can learn alternative ways to cope with stressors.

Why Do We Have Dog Bite Scales?

Dog bite scales like Dr. Yin's and Dr. Dunbar's offer a valuable framework for understanding dog bites beyond simplistic notions of 'bit' or 'didn't bite.' By recognizing the spectrum of bite severity, we can more effectively assess risks, implement safety measures, prevent escalation and develop meaningful behavior modification plans if needed.

Risk Assessment

Understanding dog bite scales helps identify potential warning signs early, enabling safe interventions. Dr. Yin's scale gives us some underlying motivation for the bite. If we can address these motivations, we can make strides against another bite.

- **Early Warning Signs**

It's important to recognize subtle signals before escalation. Because most bites are in the first few levels, the bite can remind us to pay attention to body language so we can intervene before it happens again.

- **Owner Education**

Let's empower ourselves with knowledge to prevent bites. Understanding your dog's stressors and triggers matters. Understanding their body language matters too.

- **Rehabilitation Potential**

Informed decisions on behavior modification potential come from understanding the scales.

Legal & Professional

The scales provide a standardized language for incident reports, ensuring consistency and clarity in communication.

Animal control officers rely on these scales for evidence-based decisions regarding the safety of animals and humans.

Insurance companies use the scales to assess liability risks associated with dog bites and to determine appropriate coverage.

Veterinarians use the scales to establish safety protocols for handling potentially aggressive dogs, minimizing risks for themselves and their staff.

Dog behavior consultants use the scales to communicate with veterinarians and other professionals caring for a dog. The scales provide data for developing behavior modification plans and educate families.

Prevention & Management

Understanding dog bite scales guides proactive prevention and management strategies for safer co-existence.

- **Early Intervention**

Address warning signs promptly for safer outcomes.

- **Management Plans**

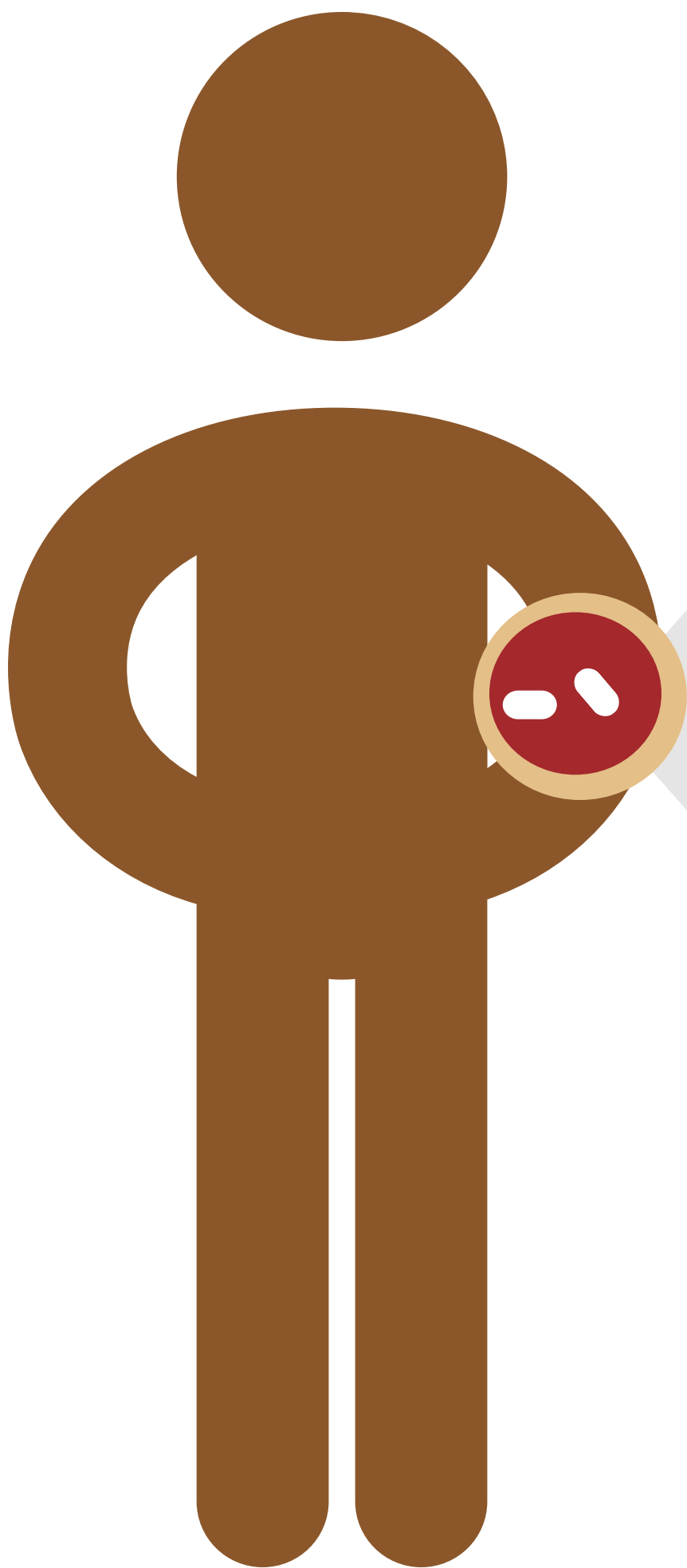
Develop tailored strategies for individual dogs and their families.

- **Safety Measures**

Implement appropriate safety measures to reduce likelihood of future occurrences.

Assessing a Bite

Before assessing a bite, secure the scene, do a safety check and seek medical care if needed. After the check is done, move on to a physical assessment, followed by a behavioral assessment. Document physical and behavioral observations as soon as possible. Include pictures at the time of bite and over time to determine the severity of pressure based on bruising characteristics.



Safety Check

- Secure the area
- Separate dog from victim
- Apply first aid if needed
- Get medical help if needed
- Document incident immediately



Physical Assessment

- Number of puncture wounds
- Depth of penetration
- Presence of crushing injuries
- Tissue damage pattern
- Wound location on body
- Clothes worn by victim



Behavioral Assessment

- Events leading to bite
- Dog's body language before incident
- Environmental factors
- Trigger identification
- Previous history



Documentation

- Photos of wounds
- Measurement of punctures
- Witness statements
- Medical reports
- Prior incident history

Using the Bite Scales

Once the characteristics of the bite are identified, it's time to identify the level of bite using the Ian Dunbar Bite Scale and/or the Sophia Yin Bite Scale.

UNDERSTANDING BITE LEVELS

THE IAN DUNBAR BITE SCALE

Dr. Ian Dunbar's Dog Bite Scale provides a standardized way to assess the severity of dog bites. This scale has become the gold standard in both veterinary medicine and legal contexts (Dunbar, I., 1999). Understanding these levels helps both professionals and pet owners assess risk and determine appropriate interventions.



**NO CONTACT
NO INJURY**



Level 1

Obnoxious or aggressive behavior, but no physical contact with teeth.

**TEETH CONTACT
NO PUNCTURE**



Level 2

Skin contact by teeth, but no skin puncture. May include slight nicks or bleeding. Skin nicks (less than one tenth of an inch deep) and slight bleeding caused by forward or lateral movement of teeth against skin, but no vertical punctures.

Level 3

One to four punctures from a **single bite with no puncture deeper than half the length of the dog's canine** teeth. Maybe lacerations in a single direction, caused by victim pulling hand away, owner pulling dog away, or gravity (little dog jumps, bites and drops to floor).

Level 4

One to four punctures from a single bite with at least one puncture **deeper than half the length** of the dog's canine teeth. May also have **deep bruising** around the wound (dog held on for N seconds and bore down) or **lacerations in both directions** (dog held on and shook its head from side to side).

Level 5

Multiple-bite incident with at least two Level 4 bites or multiple-attack incident with at least one Level 4 bite in each.

RIP

Level 6

The victim is dead.



Dr. Yin's Dog Bite Scale

Dr. Sophia Yin's dog bite scale categorizes the bites based on physical characteristics. It includes additional behavioral motivations and some modifications to the level distinctions provided by the Dunbar scale.



Level 1: Pre-Bite

Snapping (Air bite, no contact).

Get help before it progresses to an actual bite. Do not punish these warning signs or the dog may progress to biting without warning. Instead, learn the signs of fear and anxiety that the dog may show prior to the situation in the common human actions that might contribute.

Level 2: Near Bite

Tooth contact on skin but no puncture. This near bite is concerning even though it is inhibited and has not yet broken skin. Ask yourself what earlier signs (i.e. of fear/anxiety) you missed.

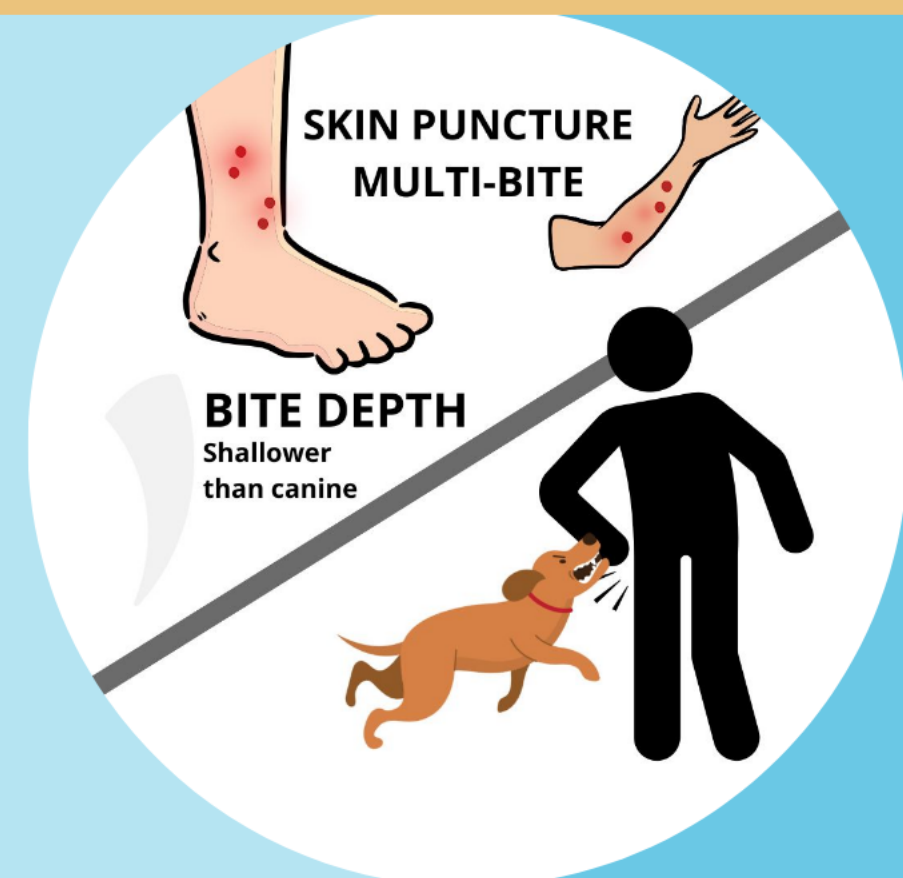


Level 3A

Skin puncture, single bite (all punctures shallower than the length of the canine tooth). Even though the bite may not be severe it is still reportable. Reporting is mandatory if the victim is treated in a hospital. Once your dog has actually bitten at this level (or higher) he will always be considered a liability, even if with behavior modification he is 99.9% improved.

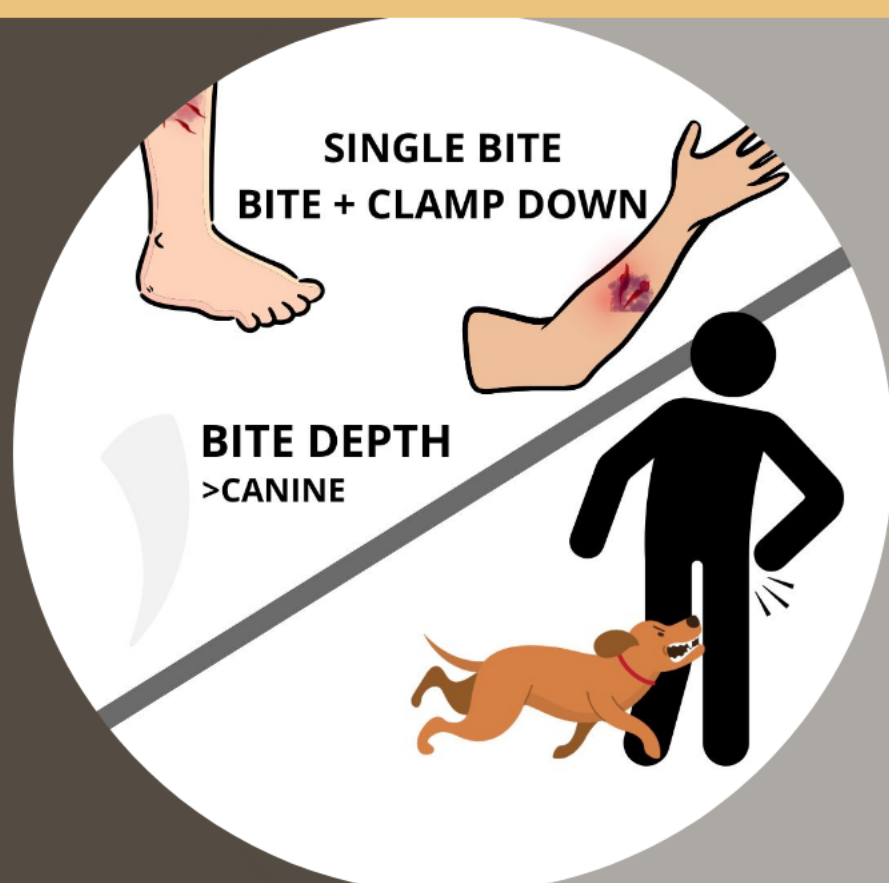
Level 3B

Skin punctures, multiple bites (all punctures shallower than the length of the canine tooth). Multiple bites generally mean the dog is in a higher arousal state. The dog is reacting without thinking in between bites.



Level IV

Single bite with punctures deeper than the length of the canine (the dog bit and clamped down).



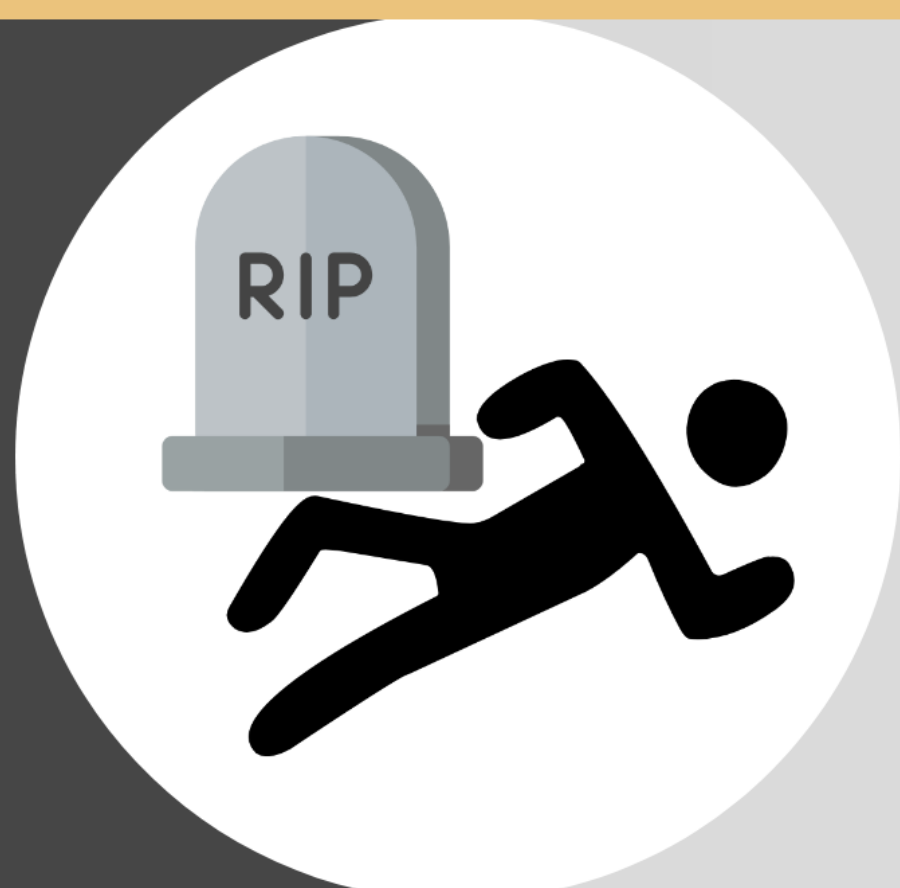
Level V

Multiple - bite attack with deep punctures, or multiple attack incident.



Level VI

Victim killed or flesh consumed.



The Sophia Yin Bite Scale is a helpful tool for understanding dog bites, recognizing warning signs, and preventing serious injuries.

Content in black font from: Yin, S. (n.d.). *The bite severity scale*. Dr. Sophia Yin. Retrieved from <https://drsophiayin.com>



COMPARISON

Understanding both scales provides a more comprehensive assessment framework. Here's how they compare

DUNBAR

VS

YIN

Emphasizes physical damage and medical severity

Focus & Intent

Highlights behavioral intent and emotional context

Six levels, more broadly defined

Level Structure

Seven levels (0-3c), more detailed gradations

Widely used in legal and medical contexts

Application

Preferred for behavioral modification planning

Prioritizes wound assessment and medical intervention

Assessment Emphasis

Focuses on prevention and behavior modification

Use Dunbar scale for initial medical assessment and reporting

Practical Usage

Apply Yin scale for behavior modification planning

common dog body language signals that often precede a bite



Freezing

The dog becomes very still, holding their body tense, often indicating they are about to react. If a dog is stressed and freezes, immediately, but slowly, get distance from the dog.



Hard Stare

A fixed, intense stare at a person, animal, or object without breaking eye contact. If a dog stares at you without breaking gaze, especially when paired with a freeze, move away to safety.



Raised Hackles

The fur along the dog's back, neck, or shoulders stands up, indicating heightened arousal or agitation.



Tight and/or Pulled Back Lips

The dog's mouth is closed or the lips may be drawn back slightly, showing tension around the mouth.



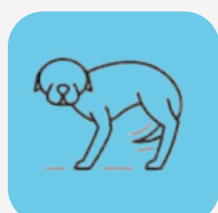
Growling

Growling is a clear vocal warning that signals discomfort or a request for space when paired with stress.



Snarling (Raised Lips)

This is an escalation from a growl, with lips lifted to reveal teeth, often paired with other tension signs.



Low Tail Position (Often Tucked)

The tail may be held low or tucked under the body, signaling anxiety or discomfort.



Body Leaning Forward or Backward

Shifting their weight either forward (signaling readiness to engage) or backward (signaling discomfort and potential retreat).



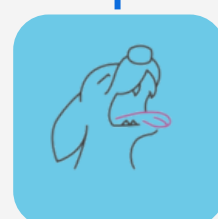
Flattened Ears

Ears may be pinned back against the head, indicating fear, stress, or a defensive posture.



Wide, Stiff Movements

Movements become less fluid, with the body appearing stiff or rigid.



Yawning or Lip Licking (Out of Context)

When these behaviors are displayed in a tense or inappropriate context, they can indicate stress.



Snapping

A quick, warning snap without intending to make contact; often a last resort before a full bite.



WHAT TO DO AFTER A DOG BITE

Try to remain calm and assess the severity of the bite. Secure the scene and provide appropriate first aid. Seek medical attention and document the incident.

Post-Bite Actions



Secure the Scene & Assess Severity

Separate and secure the dog. Calmly examine the wound to understand the severity of the bite.



Apply First Aid

Clean the wound, control bleeding, and cover it with a bandage.



Seek Medical Attention

Seek medical attention, even for seemingly minor bites. Bites are reportable by a medical professional, so the biting dog may be quarantined to observe any potential diseases like rabies.

Victim Checklist

1

Take Immediate Action

- **Clean the Wound:** Wash the area thoroughly with soap and water to reduce infection risk. Apply an antiseptic and cover the wound with a clean bandage.
- **Stop Bleeding:** Use sterile gauze to apply pressure until the bleeding stops. If bleeding is heavy or doesn't stop, seek emergency medical attention.
- **See a Doctor:** Even minor bites can lead to infections or complications. Your doctor may recommend a tetanus shot, antibiotics, or further treatment depending on the severity of the bite.

2

Check for Rabies Risk

- **Verify the Dog's Rabies Vaccination:** If possible, ask the dog's owner for proof of up-to-date rabies vaccination.
- **Contact Local Authorities:** If the dog is a stray or rabies vaccination status is unknown, report the incident to local animal control or your health department immediately. They may need to quarantine the dog or test for rabies.

3

Report the Bite

- **Local Animal Control:** Reporting the bite helps track dangerous dogs and ensures public safety. Provide details of the incident, such as the location, the dog's description, and the owner's contact information if known.
- **Public Health Department:** Many states require bite victims to report incidents for monitoring and rabies prevention.

4

Document the Incident

- Take photos of your injuries for medical and legal purposes.
- Write down the date, time, location, and details of the incident, including witnesses if possible.

5

Understand Your Rights

- **Legal Considerations:** If the bite caused significant injury or financial burden, you may be entitled to compensation for medical expenses, lost wages, or pain and suffering. Contact a personal injury attorney if needed.
- **Insurance Claims:** If the dog's owner has homeowner's or renter's insurance, they may cover your medical expenses.

6

Seek Emotional Support

- **Trauma Counseling:** Dog bites can be emotionally traumatic. Consider speaking with a therapist if you experience anxiety or fear around dogs after the incident.
- **Educational Resources:** Learning about dog body language and behavior can help you feel more empowered and confident around dogs in the future.
 - [Doggone Safe](#): Offers bite prevention tips and information for bite victims.

7

Further Resources for Victims

- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):** [Dog Bite Prevention](#)
- **American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA):** [Dog Bite Facts and Resources](#)
- **Doggone Safe – For Victims:** [Victim Support](#)

Owner Checklist

1

Immediate Actions

- **Ensure Safety:** Secure your dog in a safe location away from the victim and others to prevent further incidents.
- **Assist the Victim:** Offer immediate help, such as providing first aid supplies or contacting emergency services if needed. Stay calm and cooperative.

2

Verify Rabies Vaccination

- **Provide Vaccination Records:** Show proof of your dog's current rabies vaccination to the victim and authorities.
- **If Vaccination is Outdated:** Contact your veterinarian immediately and follow the guidance of local animal control.

3

Report the Incident

- **Contact Animal Control:** Reporting may be required by law. Cooperate fully with authorities during their investigation.
- **Follow Quarantine Rules:** Depending on local laws, your dog may need to be quarantined for a set period, either at home or in a facility.

4

Assess the Incident

- **Evaluate Triggers:** Consider what might have caused the bite (e.g., fear, pain, resource guarding). This insight is crucial for preventing future incidents.
- **Behavior Professional:** Consult a certified dog behavior consultant or veterinary behaviorist to assess your dog and create a behavior modification plan.
 - Resources:
 - [International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants \(IAABC\)](#)
 - [American College of Veterinary Behaviorists](#)

5

Liability and Insurance

- **Notify Your Insurance Company:** If you have homeowner's or renter's insurance, report the incident, as liability coverage may apply.
- **Legal Obligations:** Understand local dog bite laws. You may be held financially responsible for medical costs and other damages. Consulting a lawyer may be advisable.

6

Plan for the Future

- **Training and Management:** Work with a professional to address the behavior that led to the bite. Use management tools, such as leashes, harnesses, or muzzles, as needed to prevent future incidents.
- **Muzzle Training:** Properly introducing your dog to wearing a muzzle can increase safety and reduce stress in public.
 - Resource: [The Muzzle Up! Project](#)
- **Environmental Adjustments:** Avoid putting your dog in situations that could trigger a similar reaction until their behavior improves.

7

Emotional Considerations

- **Understand the Impact:** A bite can be distressing for everyone involved, including you. Seek support from professionals or local dog owner communities to navigate the emotional aftermath.
- **Avoid Blame:** Focus on solutions rather than assigning blame to yourself or your dog.

8

Resources for Dog Owners

- **Books:**
 - *Mine! A Guide to Resource Guarding in Dogs* by Jean Donaldson
 - *The Dog Aggression Workbook* by James O'Heare
- **Websites:**
 - [Doggone Safe](#) – Bite prevention and responsible dog ownership resources.
 - [ASPCA Behavior Resources](#)

Resources

Review these resources for more information on understanding dog bites and how to prevent them.

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