



Surviving a dog attack

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Reported By: Chris Papst

HARRISBURG, Pa. -- For tens of millions of Americans, dogs are our best friends. They love us. They protect us. They keep us company. But every year, millions of us are attacked by them and for hundreds of thousands the result is severe and can last for life. And during an investigation CBS 21 found out dog bites don't just impact victims, but every taxpayer - millions of times over.

Pictures of dog bite victims are hard to look at. They are rarely shown in the media, but they depict the real impact of dog attacks. Every year, 4.5 million Americans become victims. Victims like CBS 21 reporter Chris Papst and 7-year-old Carlos Vazquez of Steelton.

Both of which were featured in the first story of this series, which aired Nov. 7. (<http://bit.ly/1x9NEYB>)

"A couple scars on my knuckles. I've been bitten on the face, too," said Sandi Garrison, who has also been a victim. As a dog groomer, she's been bit six times and involved in three dog fights.

"When the dog is out of control and attacking, it's all over. You can't fix it," said Ruth Goodling, who has 45-year of experience training champion canines.

Both women agree, the best way to stop a dog attack is before it starts, with good breeding and responsible ownership. But if that doesn't work, a web search will offer many suggestions to prevent a dog attack, such as avoid direct eye contact and stay calm.

"They sense your fear," Garrison said.

These suggestions also include using an umbrella or stick to keep the animal at a distance, all techniques where Garrison and Goodling agree.

"I think the umbrella idea is a good one," Goodling said.

But that is where their agreement with these suggestions ends because a number of websites also offer solutions to stop an attacking dog such as grabbing its testicles, since 90 percent of dogs that bite are non-neutered males.

"I would not ever do that," Goodling said, insinuating the worst of results.

Other sites suggest picking up its hind legs to take away its power base.

"He could turn around and is probably going to bite your hands," Garrison said.

Or, try punching the dog in the snout.

"I'm not putting my hands near his snout because that's where he keeps his teeth," Goodling said, shaking her head. "People have a lot of ideas but they don't make sense because a dog that's attacking is crazed."

"It is just a fight," Garrison said, bluntly.

A fight that has become far more common in America. While the overwhelming majority of dogs never hurt anyone, a small percentage does create significant problems. Since 1986, the number and severity of dog bites has drastically increased. In 1986, there were 585,000 attacks that required medical care. Now that number is 885,000. Fatal attacks are up 82 percent over the last 30 years.

"People think of their dogs as little children in fur coats. And they're not. They are lethal weapons. And people don't realize it," Goodling said.

"Every day, I'm contacted by people who've been attacked by unrestrained dogs," said attorney Thomas Newell. He has spent the last 33 years representing dog bite victims.

"This problem is literally an epidemic," Newell said.

An epidemic that changes a victim's life while costing taxpayers millions. Newell said half his calls involve dogs owned by uninsured renters. And the majority of victims, children and the elderly, are on government subsidized healthcare. Meaning taxpayers are stuck with the hospital bills.

CBS 21 analyzed government numbers and found from 2009 to 2013, dog bites have cost state taxpayers \$42.8 million in medical costs.

"Yet, in Pennsylvania, only after a dog attacks someone does the state require the owner get \$50,000 in liability insurance. But by then it's too late, the taxpayers can't be reimbursed and the victim often times can't get cosmetic care since plastic surgeons rarely take public health insurance.

And the victims are victimized again, Newell said.

Liability insurance to cover dog bites is not expensive. CBS 21 got a quote from State Farm for \$100,000 policy in Harrisburg it cost 36 cents a day for a renter.

"We, the taxpayers, are literally paying millions of dollars a year so that uninsured renters could own vicious dogs and have no fiscal accountability," Newell said.

CBS 21 contacted the Department of Agriculture, which administers dog law to discuss this topic. Instead, the department issued a statement.

"The Department of Agriculture takes seriously every incident where an innocent person is attacked by a dog without provocation," the statement said.

"Like anything else in life, it's repetitive," Newell said. "It's only going to get worse unless action is taken, in my opinion, by government officials."

Most states allow laws that mandate certain dog breed owners carry liability insurance to protect potential victims. But Pennsylvania law forbids "breed specific" legislation. So, victims in our state are not protected.

Read More at: <http://local21news.com/news/features/top-stories/stories/surviving-dog-attack-13219.shtml>

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