

Before Visiting the Dog Park. . .

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Pet Column for the week of June 7, 2004

[Office of Public Engagement](#)

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If you're a dog owner fortunate enough to live near a dog park, you know they are fun places for your dog to play with other dogs. Summer is a great time to visit a dog park for fresh air, healthy exercise, and socialization for both dogs and people.

Dr. Sheila McCullough, formerly a veterinarian at the University of Illinois Veterinary Teaching Hospital in Urbana, says that before visiting a dog park, owners should recognize risks associated with interactions with other dogs and take precautions to minimize these risks.

One risk is the spread of infectious disease. To minimize your dog's risk of getting sick, make sure all its vaccinations are current. "Dogs that are very sick do not usually feel well enough to run and play at a dog park," says Dr. McCullough, "so serious infectious illnesses may not be a major concern. Common sense should tell a dog owner to keep a dog at home if it is coughing or vomiting or has diarrhea."

Another hazard is injury from dog bites and dogfights. Serious fight injuries can be fatal. The best way to handle bite injuries is to prevent them, and the best way to do that is to train your dog well. Make sure your dog always comes when called and is well-behaved when interacting with other dogs, new people, and children. Some parks have separate fenced areas for large dogs and small dogs, which may help keep small dogs from getting accidentally trampled or bitten by larger dogs.

For your own safety, never get in the middle of a dogfight. Even if your dog is loyal and obedient, it may not be aware of who or what it is biting when engrossed in a fight. Putting any parts of your body between fighting dogs will not stop them, but may send you to the emergency room.

Neutering your pet has benefits to both health and safety. According to Dr. McCullough, "In addition to extending a dog's health, neutering reduces male territorial instinct." She reminds pet owners that that a female dog in heat will inevitably cause confrontation between intact males. Even the gentlest male dogs, if not neutered, can be uncontrollable when a female in heat is nearby.

When playing in the hot sun, your dog may not notice that it is getting overheated. "Be aware that even though it's noon and 95 degrees, your dog will want to play Frisbee," advises Dr. McCullough. Make sure your dog takes breaks in the shade, gets plenty of water, and does not play for long periods in the hot mid-day sun.

Dog parks are wonderful places to enjoy a summer afternoon with your pet and to get healthy exercise and socialization for both of you. Taking precautions can help make your visits healthy, positive experiences.

If you have any questions about vaccinations your dog should have before visiting a dog park, or other

questions about ensuring a safe day at the park, contact your local veterinarian.

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