

10 Things You Should Know and Do Before Entering Any Dog Park

Most pet parents don't realize that every time you set foot in a dog park, you assume risks of injury and disease. To top it off, not every healthy and active pet even enjoys going to one. Ten dog park safety tips to know, so both you and your dog leave the park as healthy as you entered.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Dog parks are a great idea for dogs who enjoy playing and socializing with other dogs
- It's important to be aware of and plan ahead for the risks associated with bringing your pet to a dog park, including the possibility of injury
- Keep an eye on your dog, but also be watchful of other dogs around him — especially if they appear overly excited or aggressive
- The most common dog park-related medical mishaps are sprains and soft tissue injuries, along with bite wounds, kennel cough, insect bites and heat stroke
- Not every pet enjoys the dog park, so if yours doesn't, find other ways to exercise and socialize your canine companion

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As the weather warms up and pet parents head outdoors to enjoy the sunshine with their dogs, one very popular destination is the local dog park. While a romp at the park is typically a safe, harmless way to exercise and socialize your pet, it's important to be aware that dogs can and do run into trouble at dog parks.

According to U.S. pet health insurer Nationwide, head trauma is not only one of the most common dog park injuries, but also one of the most expensive.

Head injuries are typically the result of a dog crashing into another dog or stationary object, and the average cost of treatment is \$591.¹ The other five most common dog park injuries:

Injury	Cost
Sprains and soft tissue injuries	\$225
Lacerations or bite wounds	\$361
Kennel cough or upper respiratory infection	\$174
Insect bites	\$143
Hyperthermia or heat stroke	\$579

In 2015 alone, pet parents insured by Nationwide spent more than \$10 million on dog park-related medical conditions, with soft tissue injuries and sprains topping the list at 24,000 claims.

So before you and your canine BFF head out to the dog park, here are a couple of things to keep in mind:

- As your pet's guardian, you assume a certain amount of risk and responsibility when you take your dog to a dog park. He could be injured during play or a fight, he could be bitten (or bite someone), or he could acquire an infectious disease.
- Not all dogs enjoy or do well at the dog park, and it's possible yours is among them.

Some are too fearful, don't know how to play, or are too threatening or aggressive toward other dogs or people. There are also dogs who bond primarily with people, so a park full of other dogs holds no real appeal for them.

If your pet doesn't seem to be a "dog park dog," it's not the end of the world. There are countless ways to exercise and socialize your canine companion.

10 Dog Park Safety Tips

1. Pick the right dog park for you and your pet. Ideally, an off-leash park should have:
 - A double-gate entry, secure fencing and posted rules of conduct
 - Centrally located, well-stocked poop-bag dispensers and trash cans
 - Separate areas for large and small dogs, and plenty of room for dogs to run
 - A sheltered area, preferably with seating
 - Dog-friendly water fountains

Before you bring your dog into the fenced area, take a few minutes to scan the activity in the park. If there are too many dogs, inattentive owners, aggressive animals or piles of dog waste lying around, consider finding another park, or returning when the situation improves. Obey all the posted rules and regulations at the park.

2. Don't bring a puppy younger than 4 months to the park, and make sure your dog is immunized against disease and has a valid pet license.
3. Unless your dog is medically exempt from receiving rabies vaccinations, be sure to keep her rabies tag up-to-date or titer your dog. Unfortunately, most parks don't accept rabies titers.

While I'm against unnecessary vaccinations, the rabies vaccine is required by law for most dog parks, so if you're going to one, you'll have to abide by their rules.

If your dog, heaven forbid, happens to bite another dog or a human, you'll be required to prove his rabies vaccination is up-to-date or there could be some very unpleasant consequences for you and your pet.

4. On very warm days, avoid the park during peak temperature hours, typically between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m.

Look for signs of overheating, including profuse and rapid panting, a bright red tongue, thick drooling saliva and lack of coordination. If this occurs, bring your dog in to be examined by a veterinarian immediately.

5. Make sure your dog is consistently responsive to basic obedience commands like come, sit, stay and leave it. This will help you keep her safe in a dangerous situation.
6. Bring necessary supplies with you, including:
 - Your dog's leash
 - Poop bags (the park may not provide them or the dispensers could be empty) and fresh water (in case there are no drinking fountains)
 - Your cell phone to make an emergency call if necessary
 - Something to break up a fight between dogs, such as an animal deterrent spray or an air-horn
7. Be vigilant. It's not necessary to be on high alert every time you visit the dog park, but it is important to be observant. Don't let your dog inside the gate if there are other dogs gathered there. Wait until they wander off before opening the gate and removing your dog's leash.

Keep an eye on your dog, but also be watchful of other dogs around him — especially if they appear overly excited or aggressive. If your dog reacts with fear or seems overwhelmed, call him back to you or go to him and extract him from the situation.

Add your local Animal Control number to your cell phone contact list, and don't be afraid to call if a dog is behaving in a threatening manner and the owner isn't providing appropriate supervision.

8. If the dog park you visit doesn't have a separate small dog area, be extremely careful of big dogs around little ones. If your dog is large, don't allow her to frighten or intimidate smaller dogs. If your dog is small, find a dog park with a separate small dog area.

Aggressive dogs come in all sizes, but a **small dog** has a much better chance of surviving an act of aggression by a dog his own size.

9. Know the difference between play and aggression in dogs. A playful dog bounces around, wags her tail and generally looks relaxed both in posture and facial expression. A dog that is showing aggression often has a stiff stance, raised hackles, a closed mouth and is hyper-focused.

If your dog and another dog begin growling at each other, remain calm and don't yell. Call your dog back to you with a basic command and move to another spot away from the other dog, or take your pet out of the park if you or he still feels threatened.

If your dog winds up in a fight, don't grab his collar because you could get hurt. Instead, use your deterrent spray or air horn to break up the fight.

10. If your dog is being threatening or aggressive to other dogs, or even if he's just acting overly excited, your safest option is to remove him from the park and visit on another day. It's unwise to assume your dog, even if he's normally passive, will never attack another dog or human.

Unfortunately, it happens, and what most dog owners say is, "But he's never done that before!" It's important to know your dog's temperament and moods. It's also important to realize that you can't with complete certainty predict his behavior 100% of the time.

Sources and References

[Bloomberg, May 18, 2016](#)

¹ [PR Newswire, May 18, 2016](#)
