

# Preventing Animal Bites in LA County

May 2011

Although many animals make great pets and provide many benefits, nearly 4.4 million people are bitten each year in the United States<sup>1</sup>. California was ranked by one insurance company as the #1 state for dog bite insurance claims in 2010<sup>2</sup>. Animal bites can cause severe injury, infections, and even death. However, bites can often be prevented by following the few simple recommendations below.

Many bite victims are children who get bitten by pets at home.<sup>3</sup> In Los Angeles County, the age groups with the highest rate of bites are children ages 5 to 9 years (90 reported bites per 100,000 population) and children younger than 4 years (85 reported bites per 100,000 population) (Table 1). For that reason, it is important to closely supervise children playing with pets and other animals. Teach children to be gentle with animals and not to disturb a dog that is sleeping, eating or caring for puppies. Children should learn to always ask a dog owner's permission before petting a dog.



Adults can also take steps to protect themselves from bites. Never play aggressive games with pets. Use caution when assisting an injured or sick animal. Do not feed or touch wildlife. Pet food or water attracts wildlife and should not be left outdoors.

Dog owners can reduce the risk of bites by socializing and training their pet. Neutering often

## General Bite Prevention Recommendations

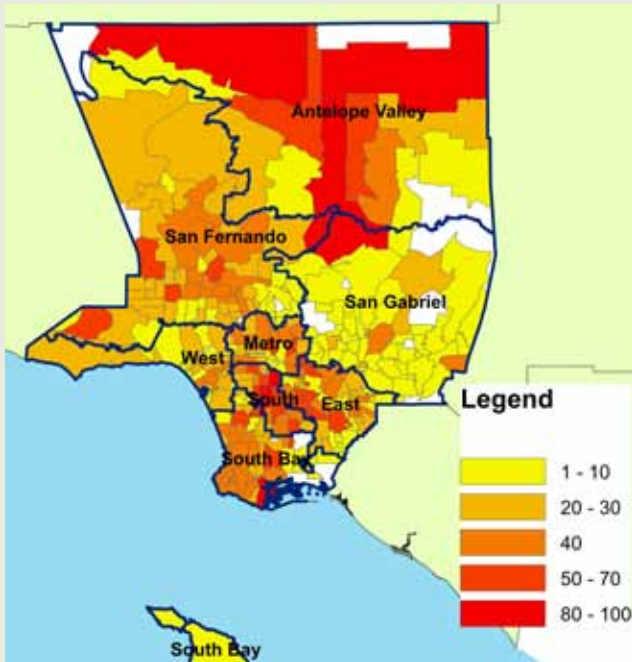
- Closely supervise all children playing around animals.
- Teach children gentleness with animals.
- Use caution when attempting to assist animals that are injured or sick because they are most likely to bite.
- Never touch wildlife.
- Pet food or water attracts wildlife and should not be left outdoors.

## Dog Bite Prevention Recommendations<sup>4</sup>

- Always ask a dog's owner for permission before petting a dog.
- Remain silent and motionless (e.g., "be still like a tree") when approached by an unfamiliar dog.
- Do not disturb a dog that is sleeping, eating, or caring for puppies.
- Don't play aggressive games with your dog.
- If you are a dog owner, train your dog.



**Figure 1** Number of Reported Bites in Los Angeles County by Zip Code, 2009



SOURCE: Unpublished data, Reported Bites data set, 2009, Los Angeles County Veterinary Public Health and Rabies Control Program.

reduces aggression. Dogs should not be allowed to roam, but should be kept in secure areas at home and on a leash when walked.

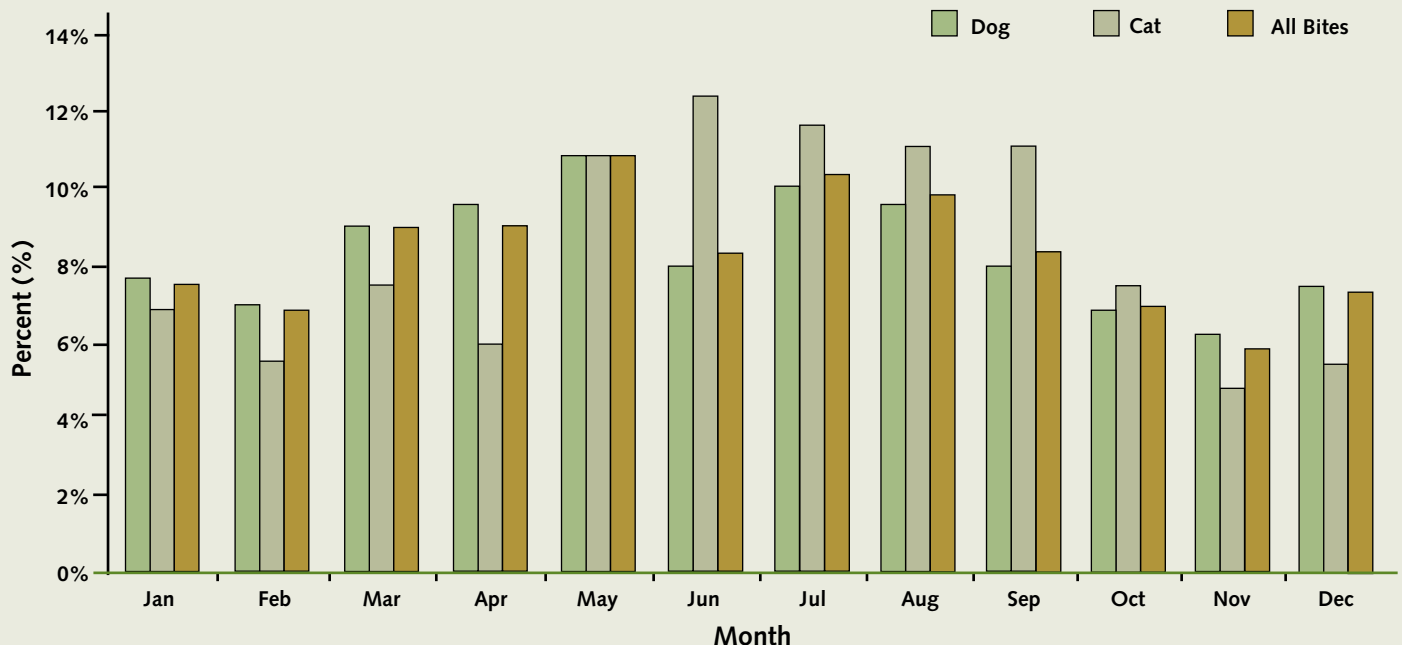
**How Should an Animal Bite Be Treated?**

A physician should be consulted on animal bites that break the skin. Bites from pets, wildlife and other animals can cause serious infections. Proper wound care is important to prevent infection. Particular care should be taken when treating bites from cats because infections are more likely than with dog bites.<sup>5</sup> However, it is up to your physician to determine which bites should be treated with antibiotics, tetanus shots, and/or with rabies post-exposure prophylaxis (to prevent rabies).<sup>6</sup>

**Do I need to worry about Rabies?**

Rabies is a serious disease because it is almost always fatal to humans and animals. By the time any symptoms appear, the outcome is grave. Human cases of rabies in Los Angeles County are very rare. The last reported human case of rabies in Los Angeles County was in 2004 in a person who had been infected in El Salvador. Prior to that, the last human case of rabies occurred in 1975.

**Figure 2** Percent of Reported Bites in Los Angeles County by Month, 2009



SOURCE: Unpublished data, Reported Bites data set, 2009, Los Angeles County Veterinary Public Health and Rabies Control Program.

Local dogs and cats do not present a significant risk of rabies. The last local dog that contracted rabies was in 1978. Since that time, rabid animals have been imported twice (1987 in a cat from Mexico, 2004 in a puppy from Thailand), but the disease did not spread to people or other pets.

Bats present the highest risk for rabies transmission in Los Angeles County. Although fewer than 1 in 1,000 bats in nature have rabies, 10% to 15% of bats submitted for testing after coming in contact with

and humans and bats and domestic animals should be reported

If the bite was caused by a stray, injured, or wild animal contact your local animal control agency to report the bite. If you seek medical attention, report the bite to your physician. Otherwise, report it directly to Public Health (see page 6 for reporting information).

### Why Report Animal Bites?

Besides being legally required, there are two other important reasons for reporting animal bites:

**1. Rabies control.** Rabies is currently not common among domestic animals in Los Angeles County, but the risk of rabies can increase or decrease over time. Due to the serious consequences of rabies, it is still important to be vigilant and report animal bites, as rabies is endemic in the local bat population, and animals from other counties, states, and countries with higher risk of rabies are constantly being brought into the county. Animal bite reports allow the local public health authority to investigate whether the biting

**Table 1 Rate of Reported Bites per 100,000 People by Age in Los Angeles County, 2009**

Age	Dog	Cat	All Bites
0 to 4	81.0	3.5	85.2
5 to 9	86.6	2.4	89.6
10 to 17	63.0	3.0	66.5
18 to 24	53.7	8.2	62.8
25 to 44	49.5	7.7	57.9
45 to 64	49.0	8.8	58.5
65+	35.1	7.7	43.3
All Ages	73.0	9.0	82.9

SOURCE: Unpublished data, Reported Bites data set, 2009, Los Angeles County Veterinary Public Health and Rabies Control Program.

a person or pet are rabid.<sup>7</sup> Most human contact with bats occurs when the bats are sick or distressed.

### Do I need to report the bite?

All animal bites to people, except rodent and rabbit bites, are legally reportable in Los Angeles County. Wild animal bites, except rodent and rabbit bites, to domestic animals are also reportable. Most bite reports come from animal control agencies and physicians who treat victims of animal bites (Table 2). However, anyone who knows about an animal bite that breaks the skin should report it.

Since bats are known carriers of rabies and their bites are often too small to be noticed, all interactions between bats





animal may have transmitted rabies to the bite victim. Furthermore, rabies preventive treatment can be started on bite victims immediately after exposure to animals with suspected or confirmed rabies.

**2. Animal bite surveillance.** Bite reports allow the local public health authority to track trends in animal bites. These data can be used to identify and implement measures for creating a safer environment for everyone in Los Angeles County.

### What Happens When an Animal Bite Is Reported?

First, details about the animal bite are collected including: when and where the bite happened, and information about both the victim (i.e., health status) and biting animal (i.e., species, breed, circumstances of the bite, current location of the animal). These

details are very important in investigating the risk of rabies. Then, if the biting animal is located, it is evaluated for rabies either by a quarantine and observation period or by testing post-mortem.

Biting animals are not always considered to be dangerous animals. Bites can occur both during play and after being provoked. Animals believed to be dangerous, injured, or loose should be reported to the nearest animal control agency (for a list of agencies, see <http://www.publichealth.lacounty.gov/vet/AnimalControlList.htm>).

### What Happens When an Animal Is Quarantined?

During the quarantine period, the animal is watched for any signs of rabies. The quarantine period for biting dogs and cats is a minimum of 10 days, and biting livestock are quarantined for 30 days. Wild animals of high rabies risk (for example: bat, skunk, fox, raccoon, and coyote) are only tested, not quarantined. In contrast, zoo animals and wildlife that have a low risk for rabies (for example: sea lion) are evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

Biting animals that have been impounded by an animal control agency must complete their quarantine period in a shelter. However, in Los Angeles County, most biting dogs and cats are quarantined in their own home if they can be kept securely. The Veterinary Public Health and Rabies Control Program is not an animal control agency and does not impound animals,

**Table 2 Who Reported Animal Bites in Los Angeles County, 2009**

Reporting Source	%
Hospital/Medical	46%
Animal Control	45%
Vet Clinic/Hospital	3%
Private Party	2%
School	1%
Other	3%

SOURCE: Unpublished data, Reported Bites data set, 2009, Los Angeles County Veterinary Public Health and Rabies Control Program.

**Table 3 Total Number of Reported Bites in Los Angeles County, 2009**

Species	Number	%
Dog	7,623	88%
Cat	939	11%
Other	97	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>8,659</b>	<b>100%</b>

SOURCE: Unpublished data, Reported Bites data set, 2009, Los Angeles County Veterinary Public Health and Rabies Control Program.

but works in conjunction with animal control agencies when necessary.

### In Los Angeles County, What Are the Most Commonly Reported Bites?

Most reported bites are inflicted by dogs and cats. In 2009, there were 7,623 reported bites from dogs and 939 reported bites from cats in Los Angeles County (Table 3). These reported bites are likely underestimates because animal bites in Los Angeles County are underreported. It is estimated that 1.5% of the U.S. population is bitten by a dog each year.<sup>1</sup> Assuming a similar pattern for Los Angeles County, an estimated 150,000 dog bites would have occurred in 2009, but only 5% of the estimated number were reported.

### When and Where Are Bites Most Common?

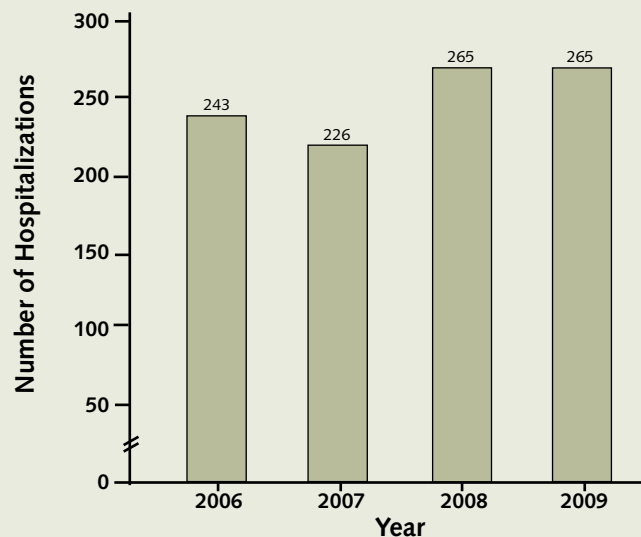
The number of reported animal bites varies by geography and season (Figures 1 and 2). Historically, dog bites are more frequent in warmer months.<sup>8</sup> However, in 2009, there did not appear to be any seasonal pattern among reported dog bites, while cat bites were more common in the warmer months (Figure 2). Nonetheless, it is important to remember that animal bites can happen anytime and anywhere and that you should report a bite when it happens.

### How Has the Number of Dog Bites in LA County Changed Over the Years?

Dog bites are the most frequently reported type of animal bite in Los Angeles County. A possible reason for this is that injuries caused by dog bites tend to be more severe than other small domestic animals like cats.<sup>9</sup> In recent years, hospital admissions due to dog bites in Los Angeles County increased from 243 in 2006 to 265 in 2009 (Figure 3). During the same period, visits to the emergency department due to dog bites increased from 7,054 visits to 8,353 visits (Figure 4).

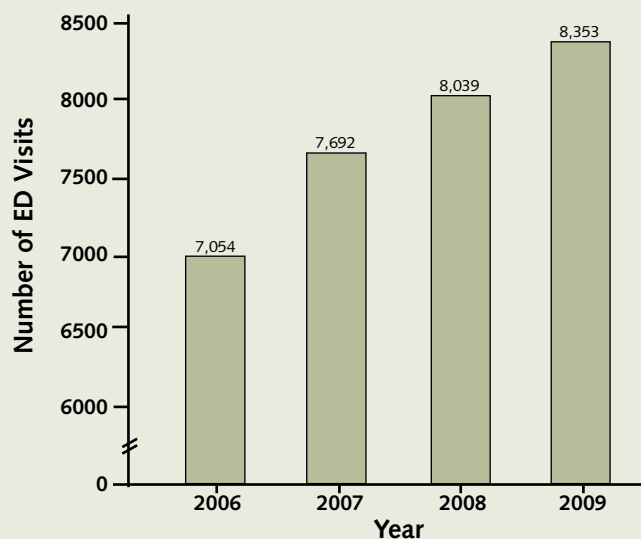
With the growing problem of animal bites in Los Angeles County, it is important to remember the bite prevention tips listed on the first page. Following these steps will keep you and your children safe and healthy!

**Figure 3 Hospitalizations Due to Dog Bites in Los Angeles County, 2006-2009**



SOURCE: Office of Statewide Health Planning Development (OSHPD) 2008-2009 Hospital Discharge Data Set (HDD) for actual hospitalizations; OSHPD 1991-1998 HDD was used to calculate expected number of hospitalizations; California Department of Finance data was used for population estimates.

**Figure 4 Emergency Department (ED) Visits Due to Dog Bites in Los Angeles County, 2006-2009**



SOURCE: Office of Statewide Health Planning Development (OSHPD) 2006-2009. Emergency Department Data Set.

## How to Report an Animal Bite in Los Angeles County

- **By phone:** (213) 989-7060 or (877) 747-2243.
- **By fax:** For animal control agencies, physicians, and veterinarians, download the appropriate animal bite reporting form from <http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/vet/Forms.htm> and fax to (213) 481-2375.
- **Online**  
**Public/Medical Submission:** <https://admin.publichealth.lacounty.gov/phcommon/public/bite/biteaddform.cfm?ou=ph&unit=v&prog=dc>  
**Animal Control Agency Submission:** <https://admin.publichealth.lacounty.gov/phcommon/public/bite/biteagency.cfm>
- To report bites in **Pasadena**, call the Pasadena Humane Society at (626) 792-7151.
- To report bites in **Long Beach**, call Long Beach Animal Control at (562) 570-7387.
- To report bites in **Vernon**, call the City of Vernon at (323) 583-8811 and ask to speak to the Health Department.

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