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Tuttle, Jack L.  
Dogs and cats need responsible  
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# dogs and cats need responsible owners

Cooperative Extension Service  
Colleges of Agriculture  
and Veterinary Medicine  
University of Illinois  
at Urbana-Champaign  
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**P**ET OVERPOPULATION has become a nationwide problem. The estimated 80 million dogs and cats in this country are about 20 percent more dogs and cats than can possibly be kept as pets. Putting unwanted animals to sleep cost \$125 million in 1975. As a result, there have been increased efforts to have pets sterilized to help reduce the number of dogs and cats to a more manageable level.

But overpopulation is only part of our animal control problem. Even if homes could be found for every dog and cat, we would still have animal control problems because of owner irresponsibility. Many owners allow their pets to run free part or all of the time. And it is those free-running animals that create many societal problems such as bite wounds, the spread of disease, and pollution with animal wastes.

Most of us would agree that dogs and cats like unrestricted movement; they benefit from exercise and fresh air. But we are asking — and in many cases forcing — our pets to live in a society not designed for them. Our society can no longer tolerate free movement of animals. More people are living in concentrated areas in the United States than ever before. In urban areas, where people live quite close to one another, straying pets have a much greater chance of trespassing on the privacy of others even though they rarely stray far from their homes.

## BITES

When pets run free, they create major public health problems. In a recent survey of mayors and city councilmen, dogbites and dog control problems were listed as the most common complaints from citizens, far more numerous than complaints about crime or drug abuse. One out of every 50 admissions to hospital emergency wards is due to dog or cat bites. And children are the most frequent victims — in fact, 5- to 9-year-olds suffer from bite wounds 10 times more frequently than from measles and mumps combined.

Many people still think that most bite wounds are from wild, unowned animals. Yet it has been found that over 85 percent of all biting dogs have owners. Even in rural areas, the vast majority of free-running animals receive food and shelter from someone, which amounts to ownership under the law. Although wild dog packs receive most of the publicity because of their destructive tendencies, most straying animals do not run in packs — they still go home at night.

Most bite wounds occur on or near an animal's home territory. All animals instinctively establish a territory they will defend — sometimes viciously — for sexual reasons, for owner protection, and for self preservation. Strangers invading this territory are often likely to be attacked.

Bite rates double during summer months and increase during winter weekends when people are more likely to be at home to let their pets out. So owner irresponsibility plays a significant role in our bite problems. Probably one-half or more of all dog and cat bites would be prevented if owners simply obeyed leash laws.

## ANIMAL WASTES

Straying animals pose several threats to public health. In urban and suburban areas the pollution of streets, sidewalks, parks, and lawns with animal excrement is a cause for increasing concern. Besides the unpleasant conditions that animal wastes create for pedestrians, certain animal parasites, bacteria, and viruses may be present in the feces and urine and can cause significant health problems for humans.

For example, the larvae of dog or cat roundworms and hookworms are able to migrate through the human body and damage body tissues. Parasite eggs can survive many months in the soil and may be swallowed by children who come into contact with contaminated dirt. Resulting infections may cause fever, anemia, and liver or eye problems. Although these infections do not occur often, children should be kept away from areas where dogs and cats defecate. Cleaning up well after playing in dirt or with dogs should be emphasized.

It is equally important that dogs and cats have periodic checks for worms and be properly treated if worms are present. Pets should not be allowed to eliminate their wastes in public areas, and owners should scoop up and discard all messes.

## OTHER PROBLEMS

Free-running pets cause other problems as well. They raid garbage cans, leaving garbage strewn over lawns and driveways; they damage trees and shrubs; and they add to noise pollution. Loud, unpredictable noises from barking dogs and screeching cats increase personal frustrations and disrupt our sleep. The after-

effects persist long after we think we are accustomed to the noise. Disrupted sleep among older adults may sometimes impair memory.

Although dogbite injuries are 6,400 times more common than rat bites, rat eradication programs have much greater public support and funding than pet control programs. But controlling dogs would also help control rats. Stray dogs actually help rats survive by overturning garbage cans and chasing away cats. Rats use food and water left in yards for pets that are out somewhere else, and rats have been known to burrow into doghouses to live.

These problems occur most commonly in urban and suburban areas, but rural areas are by no means free from pet control problems. Perhaps the most dramatic problem is the killing of livestock. In Illinois alone, 4,000 sheep, 200 cattle, 1,500 pigs, 12 horses, and 7,000 chickens or turkeys were killed or injured by dogs in 1974. Losses from decreased milk production or decreased weight gain in livestock harassed by free-running dogs cannot be estimated but are substantial. Dogs and cats also carry livestock diseases such as pseudorabies and leptospirosis between farms. As stated earlier, most of the offending animals are straying pets, not wild dogs.

## OWNER ATTITUDES

Most pet owners are concerned for the health of their animals. Those who totally neglect or abuse their pets are rare. Yet there are many common misconceptions of animal ownership that contribute to owner irresponsibility. Many concerned owners think they are caring properly for their pets when they really are not.

Let's examine areas of misinformation and how they can harm pets, their owners, and society.

*"It is healthy for female dogs and cats to give birth."* On the contrary, physical, hormonal, and emotional changes are a stress on all animals. Neutering can increase an animal's lifespan.

Male dogs and cats that will not be used for professional stud should also be neutered. As with females, neutering increases their lifespan by preventing many physical and emotional abnormalities and reducing the desire to roam. Allowing periodic matings does not diminish or satisfy the sexual instinct; it only reduces an owner's feelings of guilt.

Some parents use breeding to teach children the facts of life. Disposing of the unwanted litter, however, can be cruel and may demonstrate quite a different lesson. There are many better ways of teaching children that don't cause animal and public suffering.

*"My pet is special, so its offspring will be special."* With the possible exception of some of the least common dog and cat breeds, no pet should be bred for this reason. Pets are a reflection of their owners. Good owners will usually have good pets, regardless of breeding, by protecting against disease and by training properly. Breeding to produce a pet "just like Foo-foo" is unjustifiable because of our overpopulation problems.

*"Dogs and cats have to run free to be healthy."* Because of accidents with traffic and contagious diseases, the average lifespan of free-running pets is only about one year. Pets benefit from exercise, but no more so than their owners do.

In fact, dogs do not prefer to run free. Dogs have been domesticated to the point that they require human protection and support for survival. A dog would rather be inside the house with its owner than run free by itself. Cats are less domesticated than dogs, but they acclimate easily to indoor environments.

*"I know my dog won't bite."* All animals bite when threatened. Biting is a self-preservation instinct of all animals. It *cannot* be trained out of them, and they *will* bite when they feel their lives are threatened.

Most people cannot possibly train a dog to attack only enemies. Any training error or inconsistency can cause enough confusion to make a dog overly aggressive toward friend as well as foe.

*"I need a big dog to protect me and my family."* Large dogs are not necessarily the best protection for a home. A small dog trained to bark at the proper time can scare off most prowlers. Yet more and more people are getting large dogs. These animals require more space, produce more devastating bite wounds, and produce larger quantities of waste material.

*"I don't need to clean up after my dog."* Animal waste disposal is important for public health. All pet owners should dispose of waste material immediately and should not allow their animals to eliminate wastes in public areas.

Waste material contains diseases that can be transmitted to other animals and humans. If deposited in public areas, waste material is a source of danger for

any person or animal that comes into contact with it. Everyone must share the responsibility of protecting public health.

*“My 5-year-old son wanted a pet for Christmas. I got one under the condition he would take care of it.”* No one should adopt or purchase a pet unless he or she fully understands the responsibilities of ownership and has the means and the desire to care properly for it for its entire life. Every family member should be equally committed to a pet and should share the responsibilities. Everyone should agree on training methods, and children should not be solely responsible for any pet.

*“I’m tired of my pet, so I’ll let it loose to find a new home.”* There is no justifiable reason to abandon an unwanted pet. If good new owners cannot be found, the animal should be put to sleep. If it is forced to survive on its own, it will cause many problems and will suffer greatly.

If a family no longer desires to keep a pet that has a behavior problem, a good new home should be found. If a good home cannot be found and the owners cannot or will not work to correct the behavior, the pet should be put to sleep. Many adult animals are given to shelters because of behavior problems such as destructive chewing, wetting inside the house, or aggressiveness. If such an animal is then adopted from the shelter, a new family must also suffer from the behavior. This cycle tends to repeat itself, at the animal’s expense.

Many more animals are put to sleep at animal shelters than are adopted into new homes. This is a sad reality. Most unwanted animals will never find good owners. It is probably better to put these animals to sleep than to let them suffer on their own and die a violent death.

*“I hate dogcatchers — how can they take people’s pets?”* Animal control wardens perform many important community services. They remove dead animal carcasses, transport injured animals, and enforce rabies laws. They capture free-running animals that create public health hazards. Unfortunately, many citizens fail to cooperate and sometimes try to impede this effort. A lack of public funds also greatly reduces warden efficiency.

## OWNERS' RESPONSIBILITY

Because of the numerous animal control problems outlined above, some vocal citizens are demanding the elimination of all pets. But pets perform many important functions in our society and are needed.

Pets provide a great deal of emotional satisfaction for most owners. In fact, they are often vital in the development of children and of the physically and mentally handicapped. They are equally valuable to our elderly citizens. Dogs have been used with great success in police and military work and are well known for their assistance to the blind and the deaf. Working dogs perform many duties, including transporting material, hunting, shepherding, and lifesaving. And cats and dogs scare away or kill many kinds of predators and pests that are potentially harmful to humans.

We must find a feasible way for dogs and cats to coexist reasonably with our society. All pet owners share this responsibility. They should follow the guidelines listed below and not hesitate to mention them to irresponsible pet owners.

- Obey all leash laws and never let your pet run loose.
- Keep all pet refuse away from public areas; pick up and dispose of all waste material.
- Keep your pet vaccinated against rabies, and make sure your dog or cat always wears its collar and rabies tag.
- Take precautions to prevent needless bite injuries to children and strangers. If your animal is prone to aggressiveness, make an effort to properly warn others and to reduce your pet's exposure to strangers and strange situations.
- Unless a mating will upgrade the physical and behavioral characteristics of a particular breed or family of dog or cat, neuter your pet when young. Neuter males and females.
- Never obtain a dog solely for protection. Unless superbly trained, it may "protect" you from the wrong people.
- Do not purchase or adopt a large dog if you lack sufficient indoor space or fenced outdoor run areas to maintain the dog properly.

- Never abandon any pet. If you cannot find a good substitute home, reduce the pet's potential suffering by having it put to sleep.
- If every member of the family is not equally committed to these responsibilities, do not adopt a pet. Pet ownership is for those who wish to be responsible and care properly for a pet throughout its lifetime.
- Support your local animal control officers. They perform many important public health functions in an effort to counterbalance the harmful effects of pet owner irresponsibility.

If we understand common animal control problems and if we change to follow the above guidelines, pets can live comfortably in our society. In the long run, everyone will benefit.

*Prepared by Jack L. Tuttle, D.V.M., Extension Veterinarian for Small Animals.*

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