

# Meeting an unfamiliar dog

Be aware that some dogs can be aggressive

Many dogs will be friendly towards unfamiliar people and will not show any signs of aggression when approached, but there may be some who will behave aggressively if someone approaches too closely.

Dogs are aggressive in response to unfolding events and it always depends on what they believe is happening to them. When dogs use aggression it is almost invariably because they think that they are under some form of threat. For example, the threat could be to their personal safety, to take away something (or someone) they value highly, or they may feel their territory is threatened.

The RSPCA has designed this leaflet to help you recognise the signs of aggression and to give some advice on how to behave around dogs that show these behaviours, helping you to make them feel less threatened and to reduce the chance of aggression towards you.

## How can I assess if a dog is showing signs of aggression?

### Pay close attention to the dog's body language.

- In general, you can work out if a dog is likely to be aggressive by **paying close attention to his/her body language**. In circumstances where a dog might think there is a threat there will usually be warning signs.
- Dogs will often try to remove themselves from the situation, or otherwise avoid a threat in some way, before resorting to attack. **A slight stiffening of posture may be the first or only clue** but there are a number of other signs to watch out for.

### Most dogs will give plenty of warning that they may be going to bite.

- They may give **"leave me alone" signals** like licking their lips, yawning, turning their head or trying to walk away; they may be even more obvious with signals such as raising the hair on their neck and back, growling, snarling, showing their teeth and barking.



Do not make the mistake of thinking that a wagging tail means they are friendly.

- A wagging tail can mean lots of things, including **"I am about to bite"**! The most obvious signal will be a snap at the air in front of you, which is not a 'miss' but a warning that the next one will make contact.

## What should I do when an unfamiliar dog approaches?

### Stop moving towards the dog.

- If you are visiting a house or out walking, jogging or cycling and a dog approaches, **you have probably inadvertently entered what the dog considers to be his/her territory**. If the dog runs towards you but is not barking or growling, he/she may just be checking you out and, after a quick sniff to determine you are no threat, may leave you alone.
- Don't try to touch the dog, or make sudden movements. If you speak reassuringly and keep standing still, he/she may lose interest and leave. **If the dog is barking or growling, you are considered to be a threat** that must be dealt with so he/she is unlikely to leave.

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### Stay calm.

- **Stand still and face the dog**, slightly angling your body away from him/her.
- Keep your body relaxed and on your back foot. **You want to give the impression you are leaving calmly.**
- **Do not try to shoo away**, hit or kick the dog as you will be increasing the threat, and will increase the possibility of a full attack.

### Talk to the dog calmly in a pleasant tone of voice.

- **Tell the dog you mean him/her no harm** and that you are leaving. If you are cycling, dismount and place the bike between you and the dog. This allows you to slowly wheel it far enough away to remount.
- Do not try to outpace the dog as **this may encourage him/her to chase you.**

### Get something as solid as possible between you and the dog.

- If you are delivering something to the house it may be a **parcel, a bag or your coat**. If you are in the street or park it may be a bench, a lamp post or litter bin. If cycling, use your bicycle as above.

### Watch the dog – but do not stare into his/her face.

- **Turn your head slightly to one side and downwards.** Watch him/her very carefully out of the corner of your eye.

### You may need to move, either behind something or to get away from the dog.

- If the dog does not press home an attack, **walk slowly backwards or sideways**. Do not let the dog get round behind you; keep moving gently so that you continue to present a half side/front view of your body.

### Do not make sudden movements or run, just walk slowly away from the dog.

- He/she is not likely to pursue you very far. **Keep walking and talking** up to the point at which the dog loses interest in you.

## What should I do if a dog attacks?

### Fend the dog off rather than try to fight back.

- Try to **hold something like a briefcase, bag or coat between you and the dog**. Very few dogs press home a serious attack and after a snap-bite they will be content that you are leaving.

### Do not scream or yell.

- If you know there are people within hearing distance, **call to them for help**. Stay on your feet and do not corner yourself.

### Continue to walk slowly away, backwards or sideways, looking down and sideways.

- **Talk to the dog reassuringly**, fending off if necessary and aiming to place solid objects between you as you leave.

This leaflet is based on the RSPCA's dog aggression FAQs with information provided by David Ryan, Chairman of the Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors.

The advice offered in these FAQs is recognised by the Association for the Study of Animal Behaviour Accreditation Committee as reflecting what is accepted as good practice by those working in the field of clinical behaviour in companion animals.

»» **RSPCA DOG AGGRESSION FAQs CAN BE FOUND AT:** [www.rspca.org.uk/dogaggression](http://www.rspca.org.uk/dogaggression)

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