

Signs of fear and anxiety in dogs (How to avoid being bitten)

The majority of dog bites arise from fear, so recognising the signs will keep you safe.

Many people think you should greet a dog by letting him sniff your hand, but in reality, the best way to greet is to stay outside of the dog's personal bubble and let the dog approach you at his own rate. These rude human greetings that put fearful dogs at risk would not be an issue if the human could tell that the dogs are fearful. While many people might recognize the obvious signs of fear such as cowering, with the head low, ears back and tail between the legs, they may miss the signs if the dog is only cowering a little.



Plus there are more subtle signs of fear that are also important to recognize. Dogs who are anxious or afraid, may lick their lips when there is no food nearby, pant when they are not hot or thirsty, their ears may be pinned back or out to the side while their brows are furrowed.



When scared or anxious, dogs may move in slow motion - the way you might tip toe if you were walking past sleeping lions. They may also yawn or act sleepy in situations where they shouldn't be tired. For instance in new environments most dogs will explore or interact with people and the environment. If a dog goes somewhere new such as to a vets and acts much more sedate than normal, that calm demeanour is probably an indicator of fear. Dogs can also be hyper-vigilant when scared, meaning they look around in many directions, the way you would if you were walking in the dark in a dangerous neighbourhood.



When fearful, dogs can also suddenly lose their appetite. But then an instant later when they feel more relaxed they may suddenly be willing to eat treats. Anxious or fearful dogs may also move or



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look away from the object that scares them even if they do so fleetingly. And they may pace aimlessly instead of walking with direction or lying down calmly.



Trying to coax a fearful dog to come towards you by using food can result in you being bitten. Food should only be used as a treat to reward a dog that has CHOSEN to approach you.

(With thanks to the late Dr Sophia Yin)

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As you can see, these body language signs of fear/stress in dogs are pretty straightforward. When you see a dog exhibiting these signs as people approach, your job as the owner is to keep the potential greeter a safe distance away and to also train your dog to feel more comfortable.

Owners need to act quickly if a stranger approaches. If you wait until someone has reached you they may reach down towards and frighten your dog before you can act. So step forward and across in front of your dog as they approach, hold out an outstretched "stop" hand and ask them to wait at a distance. This then puts you in control of the situation. Only allow people to interact with your dog if you and your dog are happy about it.

For the human who enjoys meeting dogs, the first rule is to ask the owner first, and then ask the dog. That means, turn slightly sideways so you're not facing the dog squarely or staring at him. Then let him approach at his own rate. If he shows any combination of signs of fear or anxiety, avoid reaching out to pet him. Instead, stand up and walk away.

If you'd like to know more about the way dogs communicate and learn more about how to understand dog language, check out our online Canine Communication Course via the website www.downdog.co.uk