

Dog parks offer fun, but veterinarian says a few precautions can make visits even better

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Dog parks are a great place to socialize dogs and let them play, but they also have some hidden dangers, according to a Kansas State University veterinarian.

Susan Nelson, clinical associate professor the university's Veterinary Health Center, has some tips to keep visits to dog parks safe and healthy for dogs and dog owners.

Before visiting a dog park, Nelson said it's important that your dog is current on its vaccinations. Puppies should be fully vaccinated first before allowing a visit.

Many viruses and parasites that affect dogs and humans can be picked up at dog parks or other outdoor venues, according to Nelson. These diseases can be found in the soil, water and even the air.

"Many of these serious diseases can be fatal, even with treatment," Nelson said. "But good vaccines are available to prevent them. Owners should talk to their vet to make sure that their dogs are up to date with any other vaccinations that may be needed, especially for canines that will frequent dog parks."

Among the diseases your dog should be vaccinated against include parvovirus, canine distemper, rabies and various [respiratory diseases](#).

Some diseases that affect dogs, such as rabies, can be transmitted to humans. Another such disease is [leptospirosis](#). Nelson said this bacteria lives in standing water—including ponds—and is passed through urine of infected animals. If a dog becomes infected, it can lead to [liver failure](#), [kidney failure](#) and even death.

Respiratory diseases also can be a problem. These airborne diseases can be passed easily

when a large number of dogs are in close proximity. Nelson said the layman's term for this is kennel cough, which can be caused by bacteria, viruses or both.

"Sometimes this illness can go away on its own and can be treated such as a human cold," she said. "But some dogs may need a course of antibiotics. These diseases also can be more serious and lead to pneumonia, so talk to your veterinarian if you feel your dog may have a respiratory illness."

Warmer weather means fleas and ticks are on the rise, so Nelson said both dogs and dog owners should have protection against these parasites before heading outside.

Keeping your dog hydrated is important in warmer weather, but letting your dog use a communal water dish can be risky.

"Communal water dishes can be a breeding ground for bacteria and giardia, an intestinal parasite," Nelson said. "It can live in a wet or damp environment for long periods of time. If a dog catches this parasite, it then multiplies to the point where it infiltrates the lining of a dog's intestines and blocks normal digestion and absorption of nutrients."

Giardia can cause diarrhea, which contains infective cysts that can be passed to other dogs.

"To be safe, owners should simply bring their own water bowl," Nelson said.

Other intestinal parasites, such as roundworms, hookworms and whipworms, live in the soil and can be easily passed on to your dog if it ingests these eggs by licking his feet, eating dirt, etc. Several heartworm preventives are available that also contain deworming agents for some of these intestinal parasites, Nelson said. These preventives are highly recommended, but their use does not

preclude having your dog's stool checked routinely by a veterinarian for intestinal parasites that are not covered by these medications, she said.

Another problem owners should watch for in a dog park is co-mingling of big and little dogs. Serious injuries—even death—can result from the injuries inflicted to a small dog by a larger dog, Nelson said. However, dogfights also can arise between dogs of similar size, so owners must always be watchful of their pet to make sure that safe play is taking place and watching for fights that may break out between two dogs.

"If your pet is not socialized for this type of interactive play, then fights are likely to occur," Nelson said. "Owners need to keep in mind that dogs off their leash may run up to your dog. This unwanted attention by another dog could lead to an altercation."

Keeping humans safe at dog parks is important, too, Nelson said. That's why it's essential for dog owners to always pick up after their dogs.

"When bringing kids with you to dog parks, do not let them run around barefoot," she said. "There is a higher parasitic egg count in soil, many of which can cause disease in humans. Do not place babies or toddlers on the ground or let them play in the dirt. Good hygienic practices such as washing hands after playing with the dogs and when leaving the park are always a good idea. Also, keep a bottle of antibacterial solution with you."

Even though dog parks can have some hidden dangers, Nelson said they are still good for dogs.

"They're great places to let [dogs](#) stretch their legs, burn off some energy and have some fun," she said.

More information on dog safety is available from the American Veterinary Medical Association at bit.ly/WKutRA.

Provided by Kansas State University
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