

### Dog walking can be hazardous to your health



After decades of walking dogs, it finally happened to me: I took a bad fall. I've had my share of falls on my knees and my butt, but this was a first-time face plant on the asphalt, no bracing, all the force of gravity taken squarely on the center of my mug.

It wasn't a pretty sight. Teeth went through my upper lip, but after icing and X-rays at Urgent Care, I somehow got through the ordeal with no stitches, no broken nose, and no lost teeth.

Dog-related injuries or DRI's, as coined by Los Angeles author and journalist Carol Mithers, are common. She notes a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report in 2009 that looked at five years of emergency-room data and found 86,000 pet-related fall injuries a year. Of those fall injuries, 24,000 were from tripping or falling over a dog, 16,000 were caused by dogs pulling on the leash, and another 7000 injuries were from tripping over a pet item like a food bowl. Injuries included finger and wrist fractures, joint dislocations, torn ligaments and tendons, knee trauma, shoulder and elbow injuries, ankle sprains, broken noses and jaws.

"While there are a million ways to get a DRI," writes Mithers in her fall 2017 article "The Dog-Related Injury" in *The Bark*, "common sense can help you avoid most of them."

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Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor  
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Ruth Palmieri, a professional dog walker in Miami-Dade County and owner of Ruthie's Paws, was recently walking two dogs, one which was uncontrollable on the leash. As she stopped to chat with someone by a park, the unruly dog noticed a third dog behind her, pulling her to the side and backward, and she fell forward, letting go of the dogs.

Another incident occurred while walking two dachshunds, where Palmieri missed the curb and injured her knee, causing her to wear a knee brace and seek an orthopedic doctor. She attributes the falls to the need to multi-task while doing her job, things like watching out for cars and loose dogs, picking up poop, taking photos of her charges, and keeping them from eating things off the ground.

Laney Silver is the leader of the non-profit Community Pet Rescue in Miami Springs and works as a pet sitter. Ten years ago, she says, she wasn't paying close attention while walking two German shepherds. One dog suddenly yanked away and Silver fell quite hard, leaving her side black and blue. Other falls to elbows, knees, and legs gave her cuts and scrapes, but she has learned from them that *focus* is the key to staying safe.

"Be aware of your surroundings -- stay in the moment," she advises the *BT*. "Never be on the phone. Retractable leashes are very dangerous. You need to be twice as diligent with them as they can wrap around legs." Protective clothing like long pants and closed-toe shoes are essential for her line of work.

Fay Albornas, the owner of Fay's Fur Family, agrees. She wears sneakers while walking clients' dogs and never uses retractable leashes. "The dog's safety is number one -- I come last," she says. She works mostly in Biscayne Park, which has no sidewalks, and she has to maneuver dogs safely while cars zoom by. Even though she takes precautions, Albornas has fallen with dogs on the leash, too. She chuckles, "I even once slipped on a mango in the street."

A 13-year University of Pennsylvania study published in the March 6 issue of *JAMA Surgery* looked at fractures caused from walking leashed dogs. The study shows that the number of fractures in dog-walking seniors rose 163 percent from 2004 to 2017; nearly 80 percent of these senior fractures were in women. Of the bone breaks, 17 percent were hip fractures.

Men and dogs can also be vulnerable in dog-walking situations. In 2017, Robert Alexander was

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walking his mix, Petey, along NE 11th Court in Miami Shores when a loose, aggressive German shepherd mix (and repeat offender) ran out to the street and attacked Petey. Alexander fell and injured his elbow while trying to separate the dogs. Petey ended up at the vet's office with puncture wounds to his chest. Alexander now feels the need to carry mace while walking Petey in the neighborhood, and he avoids the aggressive dog's house.

Some people interviewed for this column were embarrassed by their falls and wanted to remain anonymous. "I'm a klutz," says one Miami Shores resident who tripped on an uneven sidewalk while walking her dogs. Wearing flip flops and hitting the concrete with the full force of a stride caused her to lose a toe nail. "I came down very hard, hit my head on the grass, and lost my \$5000 hearing device, which I later recovered. I'm very careful when walking now -- always looking down on the sidewalks. I'm lucky to have strong bones."

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