



Dog park caveats

What's not to love about dog parks? An opportunity for dogs — and their humans — to gather, play, and generally have fun, these canine hubs are increasingly popular. According to a study by the nonprofit Trust for Public Land, dog parks are the fastest growing segment of city parks in the U.S., with a 34 percent increase in the past five years.

But the reality is that wherever dogs congregate, there is risk, whether it's a doggie dustup or the threat of contracting a contagious disease.

Veterinary Pet Insurance Co. of Brea, Calif., reported that in 2011, its policyholders spent more than \$8.6 million on medical conditions commonly associated with dog-park visits. According to the company, the common medical conditions reported were sprains and soft tissue injuries; lacerations and bite wounds; kennel cough and upper respiratory infections; insect bites; head trauma; hyperthermia or heatstroke; parasites; and parvovirus.

Of those conditions, hyperthermia or heatstroke was the most expensive, costing an average of \$584 per pet. Insect bites, at an average of \$141, were the least costly.

Dog owners can reduce the risk of dog-park calamities by using simple common sense. Leave puppies younger than 4 months old at home, and make sure older dogs are up to date on vaccinations. Avoid taking your dog to the park when it's very warm out during the hottest hours of the day, usually between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m., and if you have a brachycephalic, or short-nosed breed, be especially careful. Look for signs of overheating, which include profuse and rapid panting; a bright red tongue; thick, drooling saliva; and lack of coordination.

And above all, resist the urge to do too much of your own socializing, and pay close attention to your dog. — D.F.