

# Off Leash Dog Dangers

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Protecting your dog and the natural environment

## **For pet owners, one of the best parts of a park is the space designated for off-leash dogs.**

The off-leash areas provide a controlled environment in which dogs can exercise, socialize with other dogs, and bond with their owners. No wonder it becomes tempting to let your dogs run free in other areas of the park as well. But have you taken the time to consider the negative implications of letting dogs go where they are not supposed to? Letting your dog off leash in non-designated areas can pose serious risks to their health, as well as to the fragile ecosystems of parks with natural heritage areas. Injuries, bite wounds, infectious diseases, toxins, poisonous plants, and parasites are just some of the trouble your dogs can get themselves into when allowed to romp through the park at their leisure.

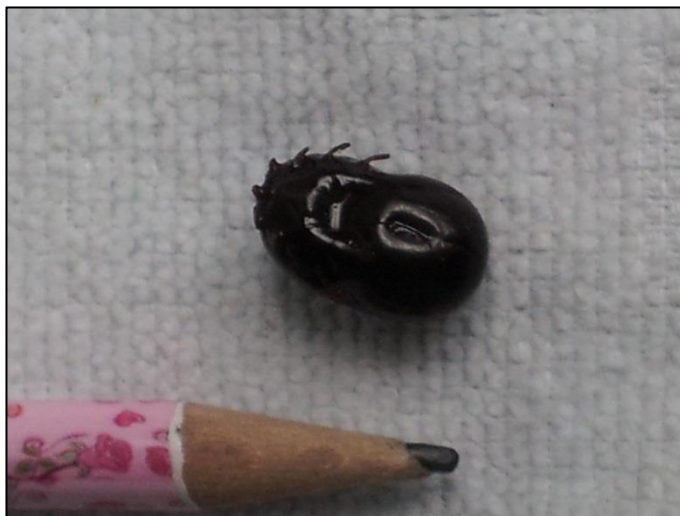
### **Plants**

Many people are unaware that some common plants can be toxic to our four-legged friends. Dogs explore the world with their noses and mouths, so it's not unusual for them to ingest things they shouldn't! Outside the off-leash areas of High Park, there are likely to be Rhododendrons, walnut shells, English Ivy berries, spurge leaves, foxglove, and various wild mushrooms. Dogs that eat even parts of these plants can become very sick with symptoms ranging from vomiting and diarrhea to seizures and coma.

As we all know, dogs can be diggers. Tulip, daffodil, amaryllis, and iris bulbs can easily be dug up and, if swallowed, can cause a wide range of symptoms, some of which can be quite serious. These plants are also common in High Park, so please help keep your dogs safe by having them on leash and under your supervision whenever you aren't in the off-leash areas.

The plants in many parks can be harmful to your furry friends in other ways as well. Chewing on the bark of cherry trees can cause cyanide poisoning. Touching stinging nettles can lead to a serious skin reaction. Burrs and other "sticky" seed pods from plants like Burdock will get caught in dogs' fur and paw pads; this can be painful, irritating, and may force a visit to your groomer to have them removed.

### **Parasites**



Brown Dog Tick

Other hazards to dogs are a little harder to see. There are many parasites that can affect your dog, both internally and externally. Ectoparasites include black flies, fleas, ticks, and lice. They are quick to spread and easily transferred to your dog from other pets, wildlife, tall grasses or plants, and sometimes even from your clothes. While most of the time these external parasites are fairly harmless, in some cases your pet can have a severe allergic reaction, or can contract serious illness such as Lyme disease.

Gastrointestinal parasites live in the digestive system of your dog. Most commonly, these are spread when your dog eats, licks, or sniffs feces of other pets or wildlife. In some cases, these worms can lead to diarrhea, blood loss, or weight loss in your pets. In other cases these parasites are zoonotic, meaning they can be transferred from your dog to you and your family.

Not to worry – most parasitic infections are easily preventable. Spring or early summer is the time to ask your veterinarian about parasite prevention. Always poop and scoop right away, and don't allow your dogs to wander off leash in unsafe areas where there may be wild animals or their droppings.

## **Contagious Disease**

Many dogs love the water – they love to swim in it, love to wade in it, and love to drink it. Did you know that your dog can get sick from these activities? Dogs can contract a serious bacterial infection caused by the organism Leptospirosis. These bacteria are transmitted through the urine of wild animals such as raccoons. Leptospirosis thrives in wet environments, like the small waterways that can be found in High Park, and your dog can pick it up from drinking this water. Ask your veterinarian about having your dog vaccinated against Leptospirosis and be cautious if your dog is unvaccinated – another good reason to keep your dog under leashed supervision when outside of the off-leash areas.

## **Toxins**

Toxic plants in parks have already been discussed, but there can be many other dangerous substances outdoors that your dog might find enticing.

Park staff may occasionally be required to apply pesticides or herbicides to protect the natural environment. Whenever they do so, the treated areas will be clearly signed. It is important for pet owners to be vigilant and look for these signs: common herbicides such as Roundup (glyphosate) can damage the eyes, skin, and respiratory tract of dogs.

Garbage, including rotting food items, can be harmful too. While guests of parks should not be leaving waste behind, our dogs always manage to nose out forgotten trash wherever they go. Mouldy food can be toxic to dogs, novel food items can upset their gastrointestinal tracts, and larger objects such as peach pits, plastic wrap, or twist ties can become lodged in the stomach or intestines (and often need to be surgically removed!)

## **Heat**

Just like humans, dogs can be victims of heat stroke during exposure on hot, sunny days. Make sure to offer your dogs plenty of water while exercising in the park. Avoid excessive strenuous activity outdoors during the hottest times of day. Keep a close eye on your dogs - if they seem tired, then it is time to head to a cooler place and take a break. Most importantly, NEVER leave your dogs alone in your car in summer weather! Cars heat up quickly and can reach oven-like temperatures; this intense heat can become life-threatening to your dogs in just minutes.



Torn Dew Claw



Broken Radius and Ulna Bones

## Injuries

Dogs love to run, jump and play, but sometimes they're not as careful as they should be! The off-leash areas of the park are designed to be as safe for your dog as possible – free of holes, sharp objects and dangerous obstacles. Other areas of the park may pose higher risk to your furry friends. Cut paw pads, torn dew claws, broken nails and skin lacerations are not uncommon injuries.

Our best friends will also find themselves in physical confrontations with other dogs, raccoons, and geese in the park. Bite wounds will often get infected, or can make deep punctures that affect internal organs. Some infectious diseases can be transmitted through bite wounds as well. Having your dogs on leash will help to prevent unnecessary injuries; even in the designated off-leash areas it is important to make sure your dogs are well-trained, get along with other dogs, and are vaccinated against rabies, distemper, and parvovirus before letting them run free.

One of the most common life-threatening physical injuries our dogs are at risk for is being hit by a car. Even with low speed limits and well-signed roadways, there may be a high volume of vehicular traffic in many parks. Dogs don't know to obey road signs – leashes keep them off the roads and out of the veterinary hospitals.

### **Protecting the Natural Environment**

This article has focused on ways that the plants, people, and animals in parks can be harmful to your dogs if left unsupervised. It is just as important, however, to think about the potential damage our dogs can inflict on a park. When they run off the trails outside of the off-leash area, they are helping to spread invasive plant species (plants that are not native to the park and which adversely affect the habitats they invade). Note that we humans can also transport invasive plants on our shoes and clothes when we romp off-trail in the park. Over time, if these invasive plants are left unchecked, they will devastate the natural ecosystems of the park, leaving Toronto's available green space forever changed. In addition, treading off trail can cause physical damage to new or fragile vegetation. Neither humans nor pets should be veering off trails for fear of trampling important vegetation. Please be especially careful in the restoration sites of a park, where new plant growth is most vulnerable.

All dogs and their people are encouraged to take full advantage of the facilities, trails, and breathtaking wilderness of our parks. To keep our pets safe and healthy and to preserve the park's natural beauty for generations to come, we must all share in the responsibility of following the rules set out for us by park staff. Be conscious of the risks to your dogs and to the park when you leave your pets unattended in areas that aren't designated as off-leash. If you have any questions or concerns about your pet's health and safety, or if you would like more detailed information about anything in this article, please contact your veterinarian's office for the most accurate, up to date information.



*For everyone's safety, please leash your pet outside designated off-leash areas*