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Tripping Over Pets Can Have Life-Changing Consequences

Falls caused by pets can cause serious injuries, especially to the elderly.

Posted Oct 19, 2018

One afternoon in May 2016, canine [behaviorist](#) Diana Rayment of Melbourne, Australia was taking Bolt, her Rottweiler, for a walk. Suddenly, Bolt spotted a group of kangaroos and took off after them full tilt. Unfortunately, his leash was tangled around Diana's legs. As she fell, Diana's body was twisted around by the leash. She wrote to me in an email, "this effectively separated the bones of my foot from the bones of my leg." Luckily, she was soon discovered by a couple of neighborhood kids and rushed to a hospital. The x-rays revealed she had suffered "fully displaced comminuted spiral fractures of both the tibia and fibula" – her lower leg bones. Diana underwent three surgeries over the next year. She now has a permanent limp.

The Perils of Falls Caused By Dogs and Cats

Injuries like Diana's are surprisingly common. In the United States, nearly 90,000 people a year are taken to emergency rooms due to falls caused by dogs and cats. Given the frequency and severity of these injuries, you would think there would be a lot of research on pet-related falls. But this is not the case. While hundreds of research papers have been published in the medical literature on dog bites, I could locate only three short articles on injuries caused by tripping over [pets](#).

I was surprised by the lack of research on this problem, so I posted a one-sentence statement on [Facebook](#). It said simply, "*Looking for stories of people injured by tripping over pets.*" I expected to get a handful of responses. I was wrong. Over the next couple of days, I received 47 Facebook messages describing falls and other accidents caused by dogs and cats. Here's a sample of the responses I received.

Emily Patterson Kane, a psychologist who studies human-animal interactions, wrote about her mom, Jacky. While washing her two border collies, she slipped, fell backward, and hit her head on the floor. Jacky was knocked [unconscious](#) for several hours, and she also suffered a crushed wrist. For the next year, she experienced neurological symptoms including [memory](#) loss and hearing problems. Fortunately, she has now fully recovered.

Nell Thompson's enthusiastic Staffordshire terrier ran into her leg a month ago. She wrote that the velocity of the impact resulted in "my ankle going one way, my knee going the other, and a cracked molar to boot." She spent a couple of weeks in the hospital, and she will likely be wearing a leg brace for at least a month.

Lauren Novak described one of the more unusual incidents. She wrote, "My mother tripped over our dog while carrying a plate and fork. She fell and the fork went THROUGH HER FINGER!" Her mom was taken to the emergency room for stitches which was followed by several weeks of physical [therapy](#). According to Lauren, her mother had a long road to recovery, and she has never regained full feeling in her finger.

Megan Alexander's wrist was crushed when she fell while walking her three dogs. Two years and three surgeries later, she is still having problems with her injured wrist and is facing the prospect of another trip to the operating room.

Nik Taylor is a foremost scholar in the area of human-animal relationships. Three years ago, Nik was playing with her dogs on the beach when Bailey, a ridgeback cross, crashed into her, fracturing her ankle. The surgeons needed six pins to put her ankle back together. Nik's surgery was followed by eight weeks in a cast and six months of physical therapy. Nik was out of work for six months

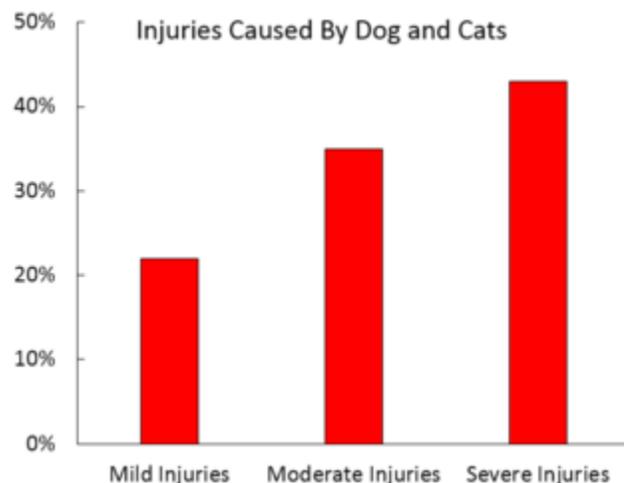
Francis Dauster is a professional dog trainer who tripped while walking her own dog. In addition to breaking her leg, she also wound up with a dental infection which required three root canals. She wrote, "Now I am VERY careful walking...I go up and down stairs like a 90-year-old waiting to break a hip."

Chris Wellman's grandmother tripped over her dog. According to Chris, "Her recovery did not go as planned. She is now wheelchair-bound and lives in a nursing home."

The Types of Falls Caused by Pets

The patterns of the injuries reported by my Facebook respondents are instructive.

- *Types of Accidents:* Most of the accidents resulted from tripping over pets (24 cases) or being pulled over by dogs on leashes (10 cases). Five of the injuries were caused by dogs who crashed into their owners.
- *Species:* When it comes to causing accidents, dogs are more dangerous than cats. Of the 47 injuries, 39 involved dogs compared to 8 caused by cats.
- *Types of Injuries:* The injuries ranged from bloody noses to broken pelvises. Twenty-one accidents involved broken bones, mostly leg, ankle, and foot fractures. There were also a few broken pelvises, hips and wrists. Twelve of the incidents resulted in concussions, contusions, or dental problems (broken teeth, infections, and root canals). Eighteen cases fell into the "other" category. Among these were sprains, lacerations, ruptured disks, and torn rotator cuffs.
- *Severity of Injuries:* I rated the injuries on a 3 point scale in which 1 indicated mild injury (painful but transient). Moderately serious injuries such as mild concussions and sprains were given a 2. A score of 3 was reserved for injuries that were very serious. Most of these required surgery, had long recovery times, or resulted in permanent impairments of functioning. As you can see from this graph, nearly half of the injuries were in a severe category.



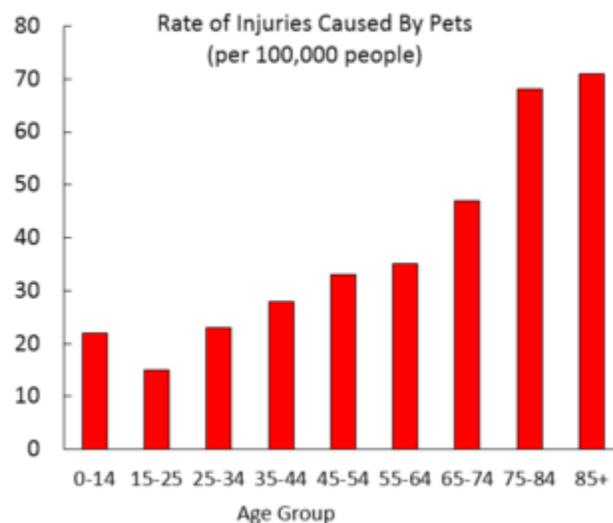
Pet-Related Falls Are Especially Dangerous For the Elderly

The stories of my Facebook respondents reveal an interesting picture of the suffering caused by accidents with pets. It was, however, a small sample, and I did not have information about the demographics of the respondents. A [2010 study](#) by Judy Stevens and her colleagues at the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, however, did reveal the types of people most likely to be injured in falls caused by dog and cats. Their research was based on admission to a nationally representative sample of 66 hospital emergency rooms between 2001 and 2006. Stevens found that among 7,826 pet-caused emergency room visits, women were twice as likely as men to be injured in pet-related accidents. And, as with my Facebook respondents, the researchers found that dogs were much more likely to be the cause injuries than were cats.

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But the most striking pattern in injuries discovered by the researchers was related to age. As witnessed by headlines like [The Healing Power of Pets for Seniors](#) the pet products industry relentlessly touts pet ownership as a key to healthy aging. But the media rarely mentions the consequences of injuries to elderly people caused by dogs and cats. As you can see from this graph, older people are particularly likely to



suffer from pet-inflicted accidents. Indeed, the CDC researchers found that people over 75 were three times more likely to be injured by falling over pets than individuals under 35. The late Oscar-winning Hollywood screenwriter Frank Pierson is an example of what can happen when older adults trip over their pets. Pierson wrote the screenplays for some of my favorite films including *Cool Hand Luke* and *Dog Day Afternoon*. When he was in his 80s, he was taking his dog, a standard poodle, for a walk in Malibu Canyon. The dog suddenly took off after a rabbit, causing Frank to fall and break his neck. He was in a neck brace for a year. A screenwriter [friend](#) of mine who knew Pierson well told me that after the accident, “Frank was never the same.”

Frances Dauster, the dog trainer who broke her leg, nicely summarized the possible consequences of tripping over pets. She wrote, “The sticker warning is that even if you have walked thousands of dogs, it only takes ONE to knock you off your pins and change your life for a long time.”

The bottom line is that claims about the benefits of living with pets should also acknowledge the potential costs. (See [Three Reasons Pets Do Not Lower Health Care Costs.](#))