

State of Alaska  
Epidemiology



# Bulletin

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*Bulletin No. 7*  
*April 17, 1981*

## **Dog Bites and Human Deaths from Dog Attack in Alaska A Public Health Tragedy**

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Dog Bites and Human Deaths from Dog Attack in Alaska  
A Public Health Tragedy

Dog bites currently constitute a major but largely unrecognized epidemic in Alaska and the United States. An estimated one million persons are bitten by dogs each year in the United States. During the two years from January 1974 through December 1975, eleven deaths from dog bites were reported in the United States. We have recently completed a study on dog bites and human deaths from dog attack in Alaska.

Between 1955 and 1980, 14 human deaths from dog attacks were documented in the State of Alaska. In addition, discussions with private physicians, private veterinarians, public health nurses, and sanitarians strongly suggest that at least twice this number of human deaths from dog bites occurred during this 25-year period of time. Of the 14 documented cases, all occurred in children less than 10 years of age. All deaths occurred between the months of March and September; five of the deaths occurred in September. During 1955-1980, there was an average of one documented human death in Alaska from dog bites every two years, compared with a total of five human deaths from dog bites reported to the Center for Disease Control in 1974 for the entire nation of 230 million people. Alaska's rate of documented human deaths from dog bites (1.8 per million population per year) is 100 times the national rate (0.02 per million population per year).

During 1979 there were 430 emergency room and out-patient visits in Indian Health Service Hospitals because of dog bites. In addition, during 1979 there were 192 emergency room visits at Anchorage civilian hospitals for dog bites. These figures exclude hospital admissions and follow-up visits for patients requiring extended care. We were unable to obtain data on the number of dog bites when the person bitten did not receive medical attention or when a person was treated by a private physician. In addition, we have no data on the number of animal bites which occurred in the military population. Due to the lack of a comprehensive surveillance system, we were unable to obtain data on the number of people who were admitted to hospitals because of dog bites.

Of the 622 documented emergency room and out-patient visits for dog bites in 1979, 292 (47%) occurred in children less than 14 years of age. There were 363 cases in males and 249 cases in females. Of great concern was the occurrence of 59 dog bites in children less than four years of age. Dog bites occurred in every month of the year. However, most bites occurred between the months of March and September; the largest number of dog bites occurred in May.

The greatest risk of dog bites was in the 5-9 and 10-14 age groups with a combined attack rate of 1,123 per 100,000 per year. The estimated overall attack rate for dog bites in Alaska Natives is 680 per 100,000 per year.

In an attempt to calculate the number of dog bites in Alaska each year, we extrapolated the data obtained from the Native population in 1979 (attack rate 680 per 100,000 per year) to the Alaska population. We estimate that in 1979 there were approximately 2,516 dog bites of sufficient severity to warrant an emergency room or out-patient medical visit. We were able to obtain accurate billing data from one of the hospitals that we reviewed in our study. The average charge for a dog bite related emergency room visit in 1979 was \$111.26 per visit. Based on the estimated 2,516 emergency room and out-patient visits in Alaska each year because of dog bite, the emergency room and out-patient medical cost alone is approximately \$279,930.16 per year. These calculations do **not** include the cost for hospitalized patients, litigation, loss of earnings, and prolonged rehabilitative care for those patients surviving severe injuries but left with permanent disabilities.

Only responsible dog ownership and an educated and responsible public will reduce the needless suffering and tragedy caused by dog bites and human deaths from dog attacks in Alaska. Only a small proportion of dog bites are inflicted by ownerless strays. Responsible dog ownership is necessary to control Alaska's epidemic of human injury from dogs.