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FERRETS - A NEW MENACE TO HEALTH
PUBLIC HEALTH WARNING

Local newspapers recently have extolled the ferret as an ideal pet. However, ferrets are wild animals capable of biting without provocation. Ferret bites are not only painful, they can be deadly.

The Epidemiology Office has investigated five ferret bites involving six Alaskans since October 1985. Four of these incidents have occurred since April 1986. In one incident, a Wasilla resident was driving home when he saw a ferret hopping across the road. He let the ferret into his car. The ferret then attacked his daughter and him, biting them both on the ankles. In another incident, a student at an Anchorage elementary school was bitten on the hand by a pet ferret that was brought to "Show and Tell". Other incidents involved bites on fingers and hands.

In each instance, investigation was required to evaluate the risk of rabies. Four of the ferrets involved in the above incidents were sacrificed and tested for rabies; fortunately, all were negative. No individual required rabies post-exposure treatment.

Ferrets (descendants of the European polecat, *Mustela putorius*) are mammals capable of carrying rabies. At least seven pet ferrets have developed rabies in the United States. The incubation period for rabies in ferrets is unknown. Ferrets often escape and establish feral populations. One escaped ferret developed rabies in California ten days after it was recovered. Rabies vaccine is not approved for use in ferrets and is not known to be protective.

In addition to the threat of rabies, ferrets can inflict vicious bites. Ferrets have been responsible for one infant death and several maulings. The animals seem attracted to babies, perhaps due to odors resembling those of suckling rabbits. Several children have been bitten on the face, some up to 100 times. Many infants have lost ears, noses, and other exposed parts of their bodies. The ferret often holds on to the bitten part until pried loose or killed. Infants suffering from numerous ferret bites have been described as looking like "ground beef" by some observers. Attacks occur so fast that injury is not preventable.

Many states, including California and South Carolina, restrict the importation of ferrets to protect public health and to prevent ferrets from establishing feral populations. Should ferrets escape in Alaska, they may establish feral populations that could harm Alaska's indigenous wildlife. Possession of ferrets will lead to more injuries to children and adults and there is a possibility that rabies will be transmitted.

PUBLIC HEALTH WARNING

- The Division of Public Health advises Alaskans not to purchase ferrets.
- Ferrets should be BANNED from public schools.
- Individuals should consider more suitable alternatives as pets for their children.
- Importation of ferrets to Alaska should be BANNED.