



Department of Health and Social Services  
Joel Gilbertson, Commissioner

Division of Public Health  
Doug Bruce, Director

Section of Epidemiology  
John Middaugh, MD, Editor

3601 C Street, Suite 540, PO Box 240249, Anchorage, Alaska 99524-0249 (907) 269-8000  
24-Hour Emergency Number 1-800-478-0084

Bulletin No. 9 April 13, 2004

<http://www.epi.Alaska.gov>

## 2004 Springtime Animal Rabies in Northwestern Alaska

### Introduction

Rabies is enzootic among the fox populations of northern and western Alaska. Periodic epizootics (epidemics among animals) have been documented every 3 to 5 years and usually occur early fall through early spring. During early spring, foxes tend to move inland off the sea ice to the shore, increasing the likelihood that they come into contact with domestic animals or humans. Therefore, it is critical during these seasons to ensure that adequate rabies control and prevention measures are in place.

### Recent cases of animal rabies

Of the 23 animals evaluated to date in 2004, seven red foxes have tested positive for rabies at the Alaska State Virology Laboratory (ASVL) in Fairbanks (Table 1). Additionally, two dogs that exhibited aberrant behavior were euthanized; they also tested positive. All rabid animals came from northwestern Alaska, an area known to be enzootic for animal rabies. Only with the rabid dog in Mountain Village was a human bitten; this individual subsequently received rabies post-exposure prophylaxis.

**Table 1. Cases of Animal Rabies, January - April 2004.**

Animal	Date tested positive	Location	Number of humans exposed
Dog	Jan 26	Tuntutuliak	0
Red fox	Feb 23	Kongiganek	0
Red fox	Mar 5	Russian Mission	0
Red fox	Mar 13	Kasigluk	0
Dog	Mar 13	Mountain Village	1
Red fox	Mar 25	Chevak	0
Red fox	Mar 26	Kotzebue	0
Red fox	Apr 6	Hooper Bay	0
Red fox	Apr 7	Kotzebue	0

### Vaccinate all dogs

Because eliminating rabies from the fox populations in Alaska is impractical, a mainstay of preventing cases of human rabies is to reduce the chance of rabies transmission from wildlife reservoirs to domestic animals that in turn can transmit the fatal virus to humans. In Alaska, dogs can serve as the transmission vehicle of rabies virus from wildlife to humans, making it essential that **all** dogs are appropriately vaccinated against rabies. Dogs should be vaccinated against rabies at the first opportunity after 12 weeks of age. The first rabies vaccine given, regardless of the dog's age at the time, must be followed 12 months later by a booster dose. Thereafter, most rabies vaccines (depending on the manufacturer) should be boosted every 3 years. Animal rabies vaccine supplied by the Section of Epidemiology is licensed for a 3-year duration of immunity.

Dogs can be vaccinated against rabies by private veterinarians and, in rural Alaska, by lay vaccinators. The Division of Public Health's Lay Vaccinator Program trains local personnel from public agencies or organizations to provide animal rabies vaccination services to communities without access to veterinary care. For more information, contact Don Ritter, ASVL, 907-474-7017, or Louisa Castrodale, Section of Epidemiology, 907-269-8000.

### Control stray dogs

In addition to attaining a high level of rabies vaccine coverage of domestic pets, communities need to actively control stray dogs by requiring owned dogs to be tied up or otherwise prevented from running free in the community. Un-owned dogs should be captured and transported to animal control facilities (if available). Effective animal control requires a collaborative community effort to devise plans that meet the needs and resources of each community.

### Recommendations for rabies prevention and control

- All dogs (and cats) must be appropriately vaccinated against rabies; unvaccinated animals can be confiscated or euthanized [7 AAC 27.020 (b) 6]. This regulation exists to protect both human and animal health.
- The Section of Epidemiology strongly recommends that unvaccinated animals that are exposed to a rabid animal be immediately euthanized. Control measures must be instituted **immediately** to minimize dog-to-dog spread of rabies and exposure of humans to rabid dogs.
- Any animal, regardless of rabies vaccination status, displaying signs of illness compatible with rabies should be immediately euthanized and tested for rabies. Rabid animals may display obvious neurologic impairment, such as a staggering gait or inappropriate response to stimuli, but also may display subtle signs, such as mild drooling or reluctance to move. Any animal that dies without an obvious cause in a rabies enzootic area should be evaluated for rabies.
- Persons who see wildlife, such as foxes, acting inappropriately should contact local wildlife authority or public safety officer.
- If vaccinated animals are exposed to rabid animals, they may be immediately revaccinated and then confined for a minimum of 30 days. However, if vaccinated animals cannot be adequately confined or quarantined, they should be euthanized.
- Lay Vaccinators and animal owners should maintain readily accessible, up-to-date rabies vaccination records to expedite public health decision-making.

Rabies is considered a **public health emergency**. Any bite to a human that occurs in a rabies enzootic area should be reported to the Section of Epidemiology where staff are available 24-hours a day for consultation in determining what constitutes a rabies exposure, and for assistance in submitting an animal head for testing or obtaining rabies post-exposure prophylaxis for humans exposed to a rabid animal.

**During business hours..... 907-269-8000**  
**After hours..... 800-478-0084**