

Dog Bite Injuries in Georgia

Why Georgia's Vicious Propensity Standard Changes What It Takes To Win These Cases

A dog bite is not the kind of accident where liability is automatically clear. Georgia doesn't follow a simple one-bite rule or strict liability standard. Instead, the law requires a showing that the owner knew, or should have known, that the animal had dangerous tendencies. That knowledge requirement is what separates a case that recovers full compensation from one that stalls before it gets started.

The injuries from a serious dog attack are anything but simple. According to [CDC mortality data on dog bites and strikes](#), a total of 468 people in the United States died from being bitten or struck by a dog during 2011 through 2021, an average of 43 deaths per year. Nonfatal attacks produce a far larger and less-reported population of victims: laceration injuries, nerve damage, crush injuries from large breed bites, and serious secondary infections that can escalate well beyond the initial wound.

The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) has tracked dog bite fatalities through its National Vital Statistics System for decades, and the numbers confirm what emergency room physicians see every year: these injuries are serious, they're common, and they're preventable when owners take their legal obligations seriously.

At the [Law Offices of Gary Martin Hays & Associates, P.C.](#), our [Georgia personal injury lawyers](#) represent people hurt in dog attacks across Atlanta and throughout the state. Since 1993, we've recovered over [\\$1 billion for Georgia families](#) dealing with serious injuries, and we know how to build the factual record that Georgia's dog bite statute requires.

What Georgia's Dog Bite Law Actually Requires

The governing statute is [O.C.G.A. § 51-2-7](#), which holds that a person who owns or keeps a vicious or dangerous animal and who, by careless management or by allowing the animal to go at liberty, causes injury to another person may be liable for damages. The injured person must not have provoked the injury through their own act.

The liability framework under § 51-2-7 turns on a few elements that shape how these cases are built:

- **Prior Knowledge Of Vicious Propensity:** The owner must have known or had reason to know that the animal had dangerous tendencies. Evidence of prior biting incidents, growling at people, aggressive behavior toward other animals, or neighborhood complaints all help establish that knowledge. The first incident isn't automatically unactionable, but it requires more creative fact-gathering to show the owner had warning signs they ignored.
- **Careless Management Or At-Large Status:** The statute reaches owners who didn't securely contain the dog, left it unattended in a situation where contact with people was foreseeable, or allowed it to roam off the property. A dog that escapes a yard with a

broken fence or is left outside on a property where visitors are expected creates exactly the management failure the statute addresses.

- **Leash Law Violations As Substitute For Prior History:** The statute provides a significant procedural benefit for victims in jurisdictions with leash laws. If a city, county, or consolidated government ordinance required the dog to be at heel or on a leash and the dog was off-leash at the time of the attack, that ordinance violation is sufficient to establish the animal's dangerous character for purposes of the case. This provision allows claims to proceed in serious first-bite incidents when there's a leash law violation, even without documented prior biting history.
- **No Provocation By The Victim:** A victim who provoked the attack through their own actions may face a fault reduction under Georgia's comparative negligence rules. The provocation analysis looks at whether the victim did something a reasonable person would understand to be threatening or provocative to the animal. Normal activity, such as walking past the dog's yard, jogging on a shared trail, or approaching someone's front door as a guest, doesn't constitute provocation.

Leash Law Violations And How They Change The Liability Picture

Georgia's cities and counties have varying leash ordinances, but most require dogs to be under control or on a leash when off the owner's property. Under § 51-2-7's leash law provision, a victim doesn't have to prove the dog had bitten someone before. The ordinance violation alone satisfies the element that would otherwise require proof of known vicious propensity.

This matters enormously in practice. In the majority of serious dog bite cases, the victim didn't know the dog had bitten anyone before and the owner claims the attack was unexpected. The leash law provision breaks through that defense by making the legal standard turn on whether the owner was complying with the law at the moment the attack occurred. A dog that bites someone while running loose in a jurisdiction with a leash ordinance triggers liability through the owner's violation rather than through the victim's burden to prove prior dangerous behavior.

Imagine a woman returning to her car after leaving a friend's house in the evening. A neighbor's dog has pushed through a gate that wasn't properly latched and is loose in the shared parking area. The dog attacks without warning, biting the woman's arm and hand before the neighbor can intervene. The leash ordinance violation is the legal hook that moves the case forward without needing to reconstruct the dog's full behavioral history.

Who Else May Be Liable Beyond The Dog's Owner?

Georgia's dog bite liability analysis doesn't always end with the owner. The person who keeps a dog, which the statute includes alongside owner liability, can be a tenant who introduced a dangerous animal into a rental property over a landlord's objection, or a dog sitter who was managing the animal when the attack occurred. Each scenario may add defendants and additional insurance coverage.

[Premises liability](#) principles can bring in a property owner who knew a tenant kept a dangerous dog and failed to address the risk. If a landlord had received complaints about an aggressive

dog on the property and took no action, the landlord's failure to act creates potential liability independent of the dog owner's. The same analysis applies to commercial properties, kennels, and other facilities where dogs are present and the operator has a duty to control them.

Injuries That Define Dog Bite Claims In Georgia

Dog attacks produce injuries that span a wide range in immediate severity and long-term consequence. The wound pattern depends on the dog's size and breed, where on the body the bite occurs, and whether the victim was able to partially protect themselves before the attack escalated.

The injuries that define serious dog bite cases include:

- **Deep Puncture And Laceration Wounds:** A large dog's bite can produce punctures that go through muscle and into underlying structures, and lacerations that require surgical closure with multiple-layer repair. The force of a serious bite can fracture bones in the hand or forearm when the victim instinctively raises an arm to protect the face. Nerve and tendon damage from deep bites in the hand or forearm can leave permanent functional impairment.
- **Crush Injuries From High-Bite-Force Breeds:** The mechanical force of a bite from large working or guard breeds can produce crush-pattern injuries that go beyond the visible wound. Compartment syndrome in crushed limbs, vascular compromise requiring emergency intervention, and bone fractures visible on imaging are outcomes in the most serious high-force attacks.
- **Infection And Systemic Complications:** Dog bites carry a high infection risk from oral flora that enters the wound at the moment of the bite. Pasteurella, staphylococcal, and streptococcal infections are common, and in immunocompromised victims can progress rapidly to systemic infection. Delayed symptoms from apparently minor wounds are a real risk in bite injuries, where a wound that looks manageable on day one may become seriously infected by day three.
- **Facial And Scalp Injuries:** Children are particularly vulnerable to facial and scalp attacks because their heads are at the dog's level. Facial lacerations in bite cases often require plastic surgery, produce visible scarring, and carry psychological consequences that extend well beyond the physical healing process.
- **Psychological Trauma:** Victims of serious dog attacks frequently develop post-traumatic stress, phobic responses to dogs and similar animals, and anxiety in outdoor or social environments where dogs might appear. These psychological injuries are real, documentable, and compensable, but they require consistent medical documentation from the time of the attack rather than retrospective claims.

Soft tissue injuries from bites that don't produce dramatic visible damage can be underestimated by carriers who want to characterize the attack as minor. A bite that produces deep muscle damage without severe external appearance can cause significant functional limitation, and the gap between visible injury and actual impairment is exactly where insurance adjusters focus their minimization efforts.

How Insurance Carriers Defend Dog Bite Claims In Georgia

Most homeowner's insurance policies include coverage for dog bite liability, and the defense strategy in these cases is well-rehearsed. Carriers routinely argue that the victim provoked the attack, that the owner had no prior knowledge of the dog's dangerous character, and that the injuries are less severe than presented. All three arguments map directly to the elements of the Georgia statute, which is why the liability analysis matters as much as the damages picture.

Georgia's modified comparative fault framework gives carriers a tool to reduce claims by arguing the victim was partially responsible. A child who approached the dog despite a warning, or an adult who entered a posted area, gives the defense an opening. But normal behavior in a public setting or as a lawful visitor to a property doesn't constitute comparative fault, and experienced legal representation makes sure that distinction is clear from the start.

Georgia's Senate Bill 68, signed April 21, 2025, adds the [phantom damages reform](#) to the carriers' toolkit. Juries in cases going to trial now see both billed and paid medical amounts, and the carrier uses the gap between those numbers to push valuation down. Serious bite injuries that require multiple surgeries, reconstruction, and long-term wound management generate the kind of billing complexity that carriers are already building arguments around.

The Vicious Propensity Element And Why Evidence Preservation Matters

The strongest dog bite cases are built before the facts disperse. Animal control records, prior complaint documentation, neighbor accounts of aggressive behavior, veterinary records reflecting prior incidents, and security or doorbell camera footage from around the time of the attack all contribute to the factual record. That record becomes harder to reconstruct as memories fade, neighbors move, and electronic footage overwrites.

We handle dog bite injury cases on a contingency basis, which means our fee comes from the compensation we recover for you. If you were injured in a dog attack in Georgia, [contact us](#) to discuss what you're dealing with and what a claim in your situation might involve.