



Rabies –It's Out There

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With the return of warmer weather, hibernating skunks, raccoons and opossums are beginning to awaken and wander through neighborhood streets and backyards. Local health departments receive many phone calls regarding these animals when they appear “sickly” or “acting funny.” Now is a good time to brush up on your knowledge of Rabies.

Rabies is a fatal viral disease that can affect all warm blooded animals, including humans. It can be carried by skunks, raccoons, opossum, fox, woodchucks, bats or other animals, and is usually transmitted by the bite of an infected animal. Rabies may also be transmitted when the saliva or tissue from the nervous system of an infected animal gets into an open wound or mucus membrane of the eyes, nose or mouth. It is NOT transmitted by contact with urine, feces, blood or skunk spray.

Wild animals infected by the virus may demonstrate a variety of symptoms. They may be unusually friendly or show unprovoked aggression toward other animals, pets or humans. They may seem uncoordinated when walking, drool excessively, appear disoriented or paralyzed. It is NOT true that nocturnal animals, such as raccoons, seen during daylight hours must be rabid. Only when the animal is acting strangely or sick should people contact their local animal control officer or police.

Since 1991, Connecticut has experienced an outbreak of rabies in wild animals. Rabies is now found in all eight counties in Connecticut. There is no treatment for rabies after symptoms of the disease appear. Therefore, it is important for you to know what you can do to reduce your risk of getting the disease.

Avoid contact with unfamiliar animals. Do not handle, feed or intentionally attract wild animals with open trashcans or litter. To discourage wildlife from living in or around your home, cap chimneys, screen crawlspaces and repair openings into buildings. NEVER adopt

wild animals or bring them into your home. Teach your children never to handle unfamiliar animals, wild or domestic, even if they appear friendly. Report any strange acting animals to your local police or animal control officer and bring your pets and children indoors.

Protect your pets from rabies through vaccination. This is important not only to keep your pets from getting rabies, but also to provide a barrier of protection to you, if your pet is bitten by a rabid wild animal. Unvaccinated pets pose the greatest risk of rabies exposure to humans. If your dog or cat is unvaccinated and exposed to a rabid animal, it must be euthanized or removed from the home and quarantined for 6 months. Don't let your pets run wild. Keep them under your direct supervision so they do not come in contact with wild animals. If your pet tangles with another animal, always use gloves to handle your pet or to examine a wet wound, or allow the fur to dry completely before you examine the wound. The rabies virus needs a moist environment to survive. Contact your veterinarian for advice.

Because bats are now also a reservoir for rabies in Connecticut, people should know what to do in case of exposure to a bat. Whenever possible, the bat should be captured and sent to a laboratory for rabies testing. People usually know when they have been bitten by a bat. However, because bats have small teeth that may leave marks that are not easily seen, there are situations in which you should seek medical advice even in the absence of an obvious bite wound. For example, if you awaken and find a bat in your room or see a bat in the room of an unattended child, seek medical advice and have the bat tested. People cannot get rabies just from seeing a bat in an attic, in a cave, or at a distance. In addition, people cannot get rabies from having contact with bat guano (feces), blood, or urine, or from touching a bat on its fur (even though bats should never be handled!).

If you are bitten, scratched, or think you may have been exposed to the rabies virus, wash the exposed area thoroughly with soap and water and contact your doctor or emergency clinic. If possible, capture or destroy the animal without damaging its head. Immediately report the incident to the police or animal control officer. They can help with arranging for testing of the suspect animal in cases where there is a human exposure. There is a period of time when you can get treatment before the virus causes rabies. Prompt, immediate attention is required to prevent the disease.

For more information, contact the Naugatuck Valley Health District at 881-3255 during normal business hours, Monday through Friday, 8:30 AM to 4:00 PM. Naugatuck Valley

Health District serves the residents of Ansonia, Beacon Falls, Derby, Naugatuck, Seymour and Shelton.