RABIES

MAINE DEPARTMENT OF INLAND FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE

2000

In cooperation with the Maine Dept. of Human Services, Division of Disease Control
3. Call your town's Animal Control Officer (ACO), especially if a domestic animal is involved. The town office or local law enforcement agency can tell you how to contact an ACO. If a wild animal (raccoon, skunk, etc.) is directly involved, you may need to contact a game warden or an Animal Damage Control Cooperator (see last page). The official may need your help in locating the animal that has bitten or scratched you. If the animal is wild and has escaped the area, you should consult your healthcare provider about possible treatment. If the biting animal is domestic, give the ACO a description so that an attempt can be made to capture and quarantine the animal. If the animal cannot be captured, discuss your exposure with your physician.

4. If your pet has been bitten or scratched by an animal that you think might be rabid, follow the same steps and notify your veterinarian. Do not handle the wound area with bare hands because there may be saliva around the wound. If it has been properly vaccinated your pet is probably safe, but should be washed thoroughly using plastic gloves, receive a booster dose of vaccine, and observed for rabies symptoms for 45 days. If your pet's vaccination is outdated it will be quarantined for 6 months or in appropriate circumstances, it may be euthanized.

HOW CAN YOU PREVENT RABIES?
• Be a responsible pet owner - vaccinate your dogs and cats against rabies. This is required by law. An unvaccinated pet may die from the disease or pass the disease to family members. Pets must be regularly re-vaccinated to maintain immunity to the rabies virus.

• "IF YOU CARE, LEAVE THEM THERE!" Teach children to enjoy wildlife from a distance and leave baby animals in their natural habitat. Avoid contact with wild animals, even "babies" or adults that appear docile and non-aggressive. It is both unsafe and unlawful to take wild animals home for pets. This should be emphasized to children.

• Bats that are found inside the home that may have exposed domestic pets or people should be tested. Always use gloves when handling bats, even if they appear dead.

• Discourage wild animals from "sharing your lunch". Do not attract wildlife with open garbage or trash, pet food, bird feeders, or other food sources.

-- PET OWNERS --
It is very important to vaccinate your pets regularly for rabies. Quarantine period for exposed, unvaccinated dogs and cats is six months; but for vaccinated pets that are exposed to rabies, a rabies booster and 45 days of confined home-observation is usually all that is needed.

WHERE CAN YOU GET HELP?

General Questions about the epidemiology and testing for rabies in Maine.
• Health and Environmental Testing Lab: 207-287-2727
• Epidemiology Program: 207-287-5301 or 1-800-821-5821
• After hours coverage for rabies calls): Adult & Children Emergency Service: 1-800- 452-1999
• State Veterinarian Office: 207-287-3701

Specific assistance for dealing with animals that may be rabid.
• Animal Control Officer (ACO)- Call your town office or local police department.
• Game Warden - During weekdays call the Warden Service Dispatcher:
  • Gray 207-657-2345
  • Sidney 207-547-5300
  • Bangor 207-941-4440
  • Greenville 207-695-3756
  • Ashland 207-435-3231
  or Call the State Police Emergency number in the phone book.

• Animal Damage Control (ADC) Cooperator - You can call an ADC Cooperator directly for help. A roster of ADC Cooperators is posted at each game warden headquarters listed above. An ADC Cooperator, or Agent, is Registered with the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife and is authorized to capture, remove, transport, or if necessary, kill wild animals, under the direction of a game warden or other Department official. ADC Cooperators may charge a fee for their services.
WHAT IS RABIES?
Rabies is a fatal disease of the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord) caused by a virus. Rabies is rare among humans in the U.S., but rabies in animals - especially raccoons - is spreading northward in Maine and other parts of the northeast.

HOW IS RABIES SPREAD?
The virus that causes rabies lives in the brain and spinal cord of animals. It is spread through the saliva (spit) of an infected animal when it bites or otherwise exposes a victim to its saliva. The virus can enter the victim's body through broken skin or mucous membranes of the eyes, nose, and mouth. The virus must reach the nerve endings under the skin to cause disease.

WHAT KINDS OF ANIMALS SPREAD RABIES?
The rabies virus can infect any warm-blooded mammal (those having hair or fur), but in Maine infection is most common among raccoons, skunks, bats, and foxes. In the U.S. most cases of human rabies have been caused by the bat strain of raccoons, not the current raccoon rabies that is epidemic in the northeast. Raccoons are the primary carrier, or vector in the current epidemic. Rabies is rare among small rodents (squirrels, rats, mice and chipmunks). Thanks to vaccines, rabies is extremely rare among pets and farm animals.

A note about bats: It is estimated that about 1 in 200 bats in Maine carries the raccoons virus. And of the small number of cases of human rabies in the U.S. most have been caused by the bat strain of raccoons. But most infected people had no recollection of a bat contact. Therefore, it is recommended as a precaution that a bat found in the sleeping area or in a room with an unattended child or incapacitated person, should be carefully captured and submitted for testing. It is not necessary to find a bite mark because the teeth are too small to leave an easily identifiable mark.

WHAT IS THE TREATMENT FOR PEOPLE EXPOSED TO RABIES?
People who have already been vaccinated before exposure (usually those in high risk occupations) should simply receive two booster doses of vaccine. People who have never received rabies immunizations are given a series of six shots: two the first day (rabies immune globulin and rabies vaccine), followed by four more doses of rabies vaccine over the next 28 days. To work best the shots should be given as soon as possible after exposure. However, if the biting animal has been captured and can be quarantined or tested for rabies, it may be appropriate to wait until the results to determine if treatment is necessary.

If you think you’ve been exposed to the rabies virus, discuss this with your physician or call the Epidemiology Program in the Maine Bureau of Health 1-800-821-5821.

HOW CAN YOU TELL IF AN ANIMAL IS RABID?
In the early stages of infection, a rabid animal may not show obvious symptoms of disease, and the only reliable test is to look for the presence of rabies virus in the brain tissue. Following an exposure to a person or pets any suspected rabid wildlife should always be tested for rabies if at all possible. Domestic animals (cats, dogs, or ferrets) that bite a person or pet will be quarantined for 10 days and then tested only if symptoms develop.

Rabid wild animals usually show at least two of the following signs: unusual daytime activity, aggression or absence of fear, porcupine quills in the face, matted fur, discharge from the mouth (frothing), lethargy, or loss of coordination. Some of these signs could also be caused by conditions other than rabies. For example, distemper, a common disease of raccoons, also causes loss of coordination, lethargy, and a discharge from the eyes and nose; healthy raccoons living in campgrounds or residential areas may lose their fear of people and seem quite "tame". However, any animal acting abnormally should be treated with caution.

HOW DO YOU KNOW IF YOU HAVE BEEN EXPOSED TO RABIES?
The most obvious type of exposure is a "bite" exposure - a bite or other wound from an infected animal in which its saliva penetrates the skin. A "non-bite" exposure occurs when scratches, fresh wounds, or mucous membranes are contaminated with saliva or brain tissue from an infected animal. Both bite and non-bite exposures should be treated if contamination may have occurred. Died saliva, skunk spray, blood, urine, or feces from an infected animal does not constitute an exposure that requires treatment.

It is generally not possible to determine if a bat carries raccoons, or may have caused exposure, (see previous Note about Bats), unless it is tested. Any dead animal should be handled as if it may be rabid. While the raccoons virus cannot live long outside the body, it may stay viable in the brain in cold temperatures or under the right moisture conditions, and cause infection if it is improperly handled.

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IF YOU HAVE BEEN EXPOSED TO RABIES?
If you believe you have been exposed to raccoons take the following steps:

1. Immediately wash the wound with soap and water and continue washing for at least 10 minutes.

2. Call your doctor or health care professional after this washing for help in deciding the next medical step.