RABIES

MAINE DEPARTMENT
OF INLAND FISHERIES
AND WILDLIFE

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In cooperation with the
Maine Dept. of Human Services,
Division of Disease Control
3. Call your town’s Animal Control Officer, 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 involved, you may need to contact a game warden (see numbers following), or an Animal Damage Control cooperator. The official may need your help in locating the animal that has bitten or scratched you. If the biting animal is a vaccinated dog or cat it will be placed under close observation. An unvaccinated animal will be placed under strict quarantine and may have to be killed and sent to the State Health Laboratory in Augusta for testing.

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. If it has been properly vaccinated your pet is probably safe, but should be washed thoroughly using plastic gloves, and receive a booster shot.

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 and 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.

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
- 24 Hour Adult & Childrens 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 week days 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 is a cooperating trapper who is certified by the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife and may 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 services.

PET OWNERS

It is very important to vaccinate your pets regularly for rabies. Quarantine period for exposed, unvaccinated dogs and cats is six months; for vaccinated pets that are exposed to rabies, a rabies booster and 45 days of confined home-observation is usually all that is needed.
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) when an infected animal bites or otherwise exposes a victim to their saliva. The virus can enter the 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, foxes, skunks, and bats. Raccoons are the primary carrier, but skunks are also commonly infected. Foxes and bats may carry a separate strain. There are several species of bats in Maine; the most common is the little brown bat. The big brown bat is less common but more frequently tests positive for rabies in Maine. Rabies is rare among rodents (squirrels, rats, mice, and chipmunks). Thanks to vaccines, rabies is extremely rare among pets and farm animals.

HOW COMMON IS RABIES IN MAINE?
Rabies in terrestrial animals reappeared in Maine in 1994 after a ten year low, it became epidemic among raccoons in the mid 1990's. The first cases were concentrated in southern Maine, but the disease is expected to spread throughout Central Maine and beyond. Rabies may infect a significant number of raccoons and skunks statewide, but it is not expected to have a long term negative impact on wildlife populations in Maine.

WHAT IS THE TREATMENT FOR PEOPLE EXPOSED TO RABIES?
People who have been vaccinated before exposure (usually those in high risk occupations) should simply receive two booster shots. People who have never received rabies immunizations are given a series of six shots: two the first day (including rabies immune globulin), and the remaining four to give long lasting protection are given one at a time over the course of one month.

Rabies injections are no longer given in the stomach muscles. 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 tested for rabies, some doctors wait until test results to determine if treatment is necessary.

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 definitive test is for the presence of rabies virus in the brain tissue. However, rabid raccoons and foxes usually show at least two of the following signs: daytime activity, absence of fear, porcupine quills in the face, matted fur, discharge from eyes or nose, lethargy, or incoordination. These signs could also be caused by conditions other than rabies. Distemper, a common disease of raccoons, also causes incoordination, lethargy, and discharge from the eyes, and healthy raccoons living in campgrounds or residential areas may lose their fear of people. However, any animal acting abnormally should be treated with caution.

Although rabies is uncommon in bats in Maine, every bat should be handled as if it were rabid. Bats are often found on the floor or ground and may appear to be dead. Attempting to pick up a grounded bat, even one that seems dead, may result in a bite!

HOW DO YOU KNOW IF YOU HAVE BEEN EXPOSED TO RABIES?
There must be contact between nerve tissue and the saliva from a rabid animal, (usually via a bite, or through the mouth or other mucous membrane). A suspect rabid animal must be killed and the brain tissue tested in a pathology lab to determine if rabies does occur. If this is not possible, a physician may recommend immunization as a precaution.

The most dangerous type of exposure is a "bite exposure" - a bite or other wound from an infected animal in which its saliva is drenched into the skin. A "non-bite exposure" occurs when scratches, fresh wounds, or mucous membranes are indirectly contaminated with saliva or brain tissue from an infected animal. Both bite and non-bite exposures should be treated. Note: dried saliva, blood, urine, or feces from an infected animal, or petting an animal may NOT constitute an exposure that needs treatment. Rabies virus does not live long outside a body, and the virus will not penetrate healthy skin.

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IF YOU HAVE BEEN EXPOSED TO RABIES?
If you believe you have been exposed to rabies 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.