

News



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Connecticut Department of Public Health
Contact: William Gerrish
(860) 509-7270

Connecticut Department of Agriculture
Contact: Linda Piotrowicz
(860)-713-2558

Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection
Contact: Dennis Schain
(860) 424-4100

Governor Rell Declares Rabies Awareness Month

Hartford – Connecticut is promoting awareness of rabies during May. Rabies continues to be a significant threat to human and animal health in many areas of the developing world including Asia, Africa, and South America. In the United States rabies is widespread in wildlife populations requiring ongoing prevention and control activities.

“Fortunately, rabies control programs have been successful in dramatically reducing fatal human infections in the United States,” said Governor M. Jodi Rell. “Connecticut has a comprehensive program that includes testing suspect rabid animals, enforcing animal vaccination laws, and evaluating potential human exposures. To help raise awareness of this deadly disease I have designated May 2008 as Rabies Awareness Month.”

According to the World Health Organization approximately 55,000 people die of rabies and 10 million receive post exposure treatments worldwide. The majority are attributable to dog bites and 30-60% of the victims are children. In the United States, where rabies in dogs has been largely eliminated, rabies is still widespread in wildlife and serve as a source of potential infection for other animals and people. Although human deaths are rare in the United States the costs associated with detection, animal control and vaccination, and medical care including rabies post-exposure treatments is estimated to exceed \$300 million annually.

"People who suffer an animal bite should wash the wound thoroughly with soap and water and call a physician," stated Department of Public Health Commissioner J. Robert Galvin, MD, MPH, MPA. "Staff at the state and local health departments can provide consultation on the need for anti-rabies treatment. Bites by domestic animals such as cats and dogs should be reported to an animal control officer for investigation."

In 1991, a resurgence of rabies in Connecticut followed the spread of rabies in raccoons from southern states and resulted in the first rabid domestic animals in the state since the 1940's. From 1991 to 2007, 5875 wild animals tested positive including 4556 (78%) raccoons and 1178 (20%)

skunks. Of the 150 domestic animals, 110 (73%) were cats and 8 were dogs. State law requires vaccination of cats and dogs; dogs must also be licensed.

"It is essential that pet owners vaccinate their dogs and cats against rabies. Vaccination provides a safe buffer between rabies in wildlife and people," said Department of Agriculture Commissioner F. Philip Prelli. "Connecticut residents should be aware that vaccinations are required by law for all dogs and cats three months of age or older."

In 1995, a 13 year old Greenwich resident died as a result of infection with rabies from a bat. It is the only human case of rabies acquired in the state since 1932. Bats found in Connecticut eat only insects and direct contacts with people and other animals are infrequent and generally accidental. It is important that people do not feed or handle any wildlife species. Injured or orphaned wildlife should be reported to the Department of Environmental Protection.

Rabies is a viral disease in people caused by infection of the brain and spinal cord. People get rabies from the bite of an infected animal and potentially from other types of contact. Symptoms progress over the course of several days from a flu-like illness to encephalitis (inflammation of the brain) that may be characterized by confusion, agitation, hallucinations, and muscle paralysis. Once clinical signs of rabies appear, the disease is fatal. Disease can be prevented by thorough wound cleaning and timely medical treatment that includes administration of one dose of immune globulin (antibodies) and five doses of vaccine over a four week period.

Rabies prevention measures include:

- Avoid contact with all wild or stray domestic animals including feral cats. Leave young animals alone and never attempt to feed, pet or handle them. Remember that it is illegal to keep any wild animal as a pet. Let wildlife be wild and enjoy them from a safe and healthy distance; remind children to stay away from all unknown animals.
- Be a responsible pet owner. Vaccinate pets and livestock against rabies, keep pets under close supervision and do not allow them to roam, especially at night when wild animals are most active.
- Discourage wildlife from living around homes by eliminating any potential sources of food or shelter. Animal proofing methods include securing garbage cans, feeding pets indoors, capping chimneys, screening crawl spaces and closing garage doors.
- If bitten by an animal, people should wash the wound thoroughly, call a physician, and, for additional advice contact the health department; if bitten by a domestic animal contact the animal control officer who will decide if testing or quarantine is necessary.
- If your pet is bitten, wear gloves when handling it or treating its wounds and contact the pet's veterinarian for advice and treatment.
- Wild animals exhibiting paralysis, incoordination, seizures, or unprovoked aggression towards people or pets should be reported to the Department of Environmental Protection or, when immediate assistance is needed, the local police department or animal control officer. Primarily nocturnal animals such as raccoons, skunks, or foxes out during the day do not necessarily have rabies.
- Bats should be kept out of places where contact with people or pets may occur such as the living quarters of homes and schools. When a bat is found in the same room as a person

who might be unaware that direct contact occurred, such as a baby or sleeping person, it should be safely captured and tested.

Contact information and Web sites:

- The Department of Public Health, Epidemiology and Emerging Infections Program, for questions regarding human exposures 860-509-7994; www.ct.gov/dph
- The Department of Agriculture, Animal Control Division for questions regarding domestic animals at 860-713-2506; www.ct.gov/doag
- The Department of Environmental Protection, Wildlife Division for questions regarding wildlife at 860-424-3011; www.ct.gov/dep
- The local police department when prompt assistance is needed.
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at www.cdc.gov
- The Connecticut Veterinary Medical Association for the 2008 schedule of rabies vaccination clinics at 860-635-7770; www.ctvet.org

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