

Health Unit Media Release

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PROTECT YOURSELF AND YOUR FAMILY AGAINST RABIES

Rabies is a potentially deadly disease caused by a virus that attacks the central nervous system. The virus is carried in the saliva of infected mammals. In North America, raccoons, bats, foxes and skunks are most commonly associated with the spread of rabies. **However, rabies can be found in domestic animals and farm animals.** Rabies can be transmitted to humans through a bite or scratch from an infected animal that punctures the skin or by direct contact between infected saliva and the eyes, nose, mouth or into an open wound or scratch.

There are confirmed cases of rabies among animals in Canada every year. In Ontario, the Ministry of Natural Resources has been very successful in controlling rabies through their baiting programs. However, it is impossible to vaccinate bats.

Fortunately, steps can be taken to prevent exposure to rabies.

- **Do** vaccinate your cats and dogs against rabies. Not only is this required by law, it is a crucial way of protecting your pets and yourself from getting rabies.
- **Do not** touch a sick, injured, trapped or dead animal. If you must remove a dead animal, wear protective gloves and wash all contaminated surfaces with soap and water.
- **Do not** feed wild animals.
- **Do** teach your children to avoid petting stray or wild animals.

If an individual thinks he/she may have been exposed to rabies, it is very important to act quickly. Immediately following an exposure to a suspected rabies carrier through a bite, scratch or lick, an individual should:

- Vigorously wash and flush the wound with soap and water. Apply alcohol or iodine, if available.
- Contact your doctor or visit your local hospital's emergency department for wound care and, if necessary, post-exposure rabies vaccination.
- Treatment for rabies is effective, but only if started early. Post exposure vaccination is effective for all strains of rabies.
- **As required by the Health Protection and Promotion Act, the role of the Public Health Unit is to ensure that all potential human exposures to rabies are investigated to determine if the individual requires rabies vaccination.** If possible, the animal involved in the bite will be confined for a ten day period to observe the animal's health. If the animal is healthy at the end of the confinement period, the person bitten will not need to receive the rabies vaccine.
- Taking personal precautions to avoid close contact with animals that are not vaccinated against rabies is the best means of preventing exposure to the rabies virus.

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) takes the lead role in investigating potential animal exposure to rabies where exposure to humans is not involved. Risk of exposure to rabies for farm animals can be high in fields, forests and barns depending on the amount of rabies in an area. Vaccination for livestock and horses is recommended, but knowledge of clinical signs is extremely important. If these animals are exhibiting neurologic deficits such as staggering or head pressing, or strange behaviour such as excessive bawling, stupor or unusual aggression, rabies may be a concern. Contact a veterinarian immediately so that a complete physical exam can be performed to rule out other causes of neurological or behavioral problems. If these signs are present and no other obvious cause is determined, the CFIA will ask the owner to quarantine the animal for 10 days. If the animal has to be euthanized or dies, the animal should be tested for rabies

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