

DHHS Cautions Public About Rabies

Concord, NH – With the warmer weather, people will be spending more time outside, as will animals. The New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) is advising the public to take precautions against rabies. It is estimated that every year 30,000–40,000 US residents are potentially exposed to rabies requiring human rabies post-exposure prophylaxis (rabies preventive medication). Furthermore, each year more than 4.7 million Americans are bitten by animals, resulting in over \$100 million in emergency room visits. Fifty percent of those bitten are under the age of 12.

Rabies is the most deadly human disease, yet it is preventable. Rabies is caused by a virus that animals and people can get through certain exposures to saliva or nervous system tissue from a rabid animal. It is virtually always fatal without proper post-exposure treatment. In 2008, 6,841 cases of rabies in animals and 2 human cases were reported to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Typically there are 1 to 2 human cases of rabies reported every year in the United States. At the turn of the twentieth century, more than 100 human deaths a year were reported in the U.S. The dramatic decrease is due to modern-day prophylaxis, which has proven nearly 100% effective. In New Hampshire, there were 35 animals found positive for rabies in 2009, which is a decrease from 58 in 2008.

“While rabies is a very serious disease, it is preventable and we want everyone to learn some simple prevention steps,” said Dr. José Montero, Director of Public Health at DHHS. “The most important thing for people to remember is to avoid contact with wild animals, even baby animals, especially if they seem tame and unafraid because they may be ill. If you encounter a wild animal that seems ill, contact your local animal control or town health officer and do not go near it. It is also important that people vaccinate their dogs, cats, ferrets, and any other animal that has regular contact with humans, such as horses.”

Some other steps to take to reduce the spread of rabies and exposure to wild animals are:

- Don't let your pets roam free to help prevent them from coming into contact with wild animals
- Teach children to avoid wildlife and all animals they do not know well
- Don't feed or water your pets outside to avoid attracting wild animals
- Keep your garbage cans securely covered
- Bat-proof your home in the fall and winter
- Do not keep wild animals as pets
- If your pet has been bitten or scratched by an animal, put on gloves before touching your pet

If you are bitten by an animal:

1. Wash the wound immediately with soap and water for at least 5 minutes
2. If it is a domestic animal, find out if it is vaccinated against rabies
3. Contact your physician immediately. Prompt and appropriate treatment after being bitten and before the disease develops can stop rabies infection and prevent the disease.

For more information about rabies, visit the CDC website at www.cdc.gov/rabies or call the DHHS Division of Public Health Services Communicable Disease Control Section at 603-271-4496.