



District 2 Public Health

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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FACTS ABOUT RABIES

GAINESVILLE, GA – Although the occurrence of rabies among humans has declined noticeably over the years, the disease continues among wild animals. Incidences of animal rabies in our area are common and residents should take precautions to protect themselves and their pets. Maintaining current rabies vaccinations for your pets and keeping them away from wild animals is the best way to protect them. People should always avoid contact with wild animals. This includes feeding or attempting to help a wild animal that appears injured.

Rabies is a viral infection transmitted in the saliva of infected mammals. The virus enters the central nervous system of the host causing an inflammation of the brain that is almost always fatal. The most common carriers of rabies in the United States are raccoons, skunks, coyotes, foxes and bats.

Wildlife remains the most likely potential source of infection for both humans and domestic animals in the United States. Human rabies is best prevented by reducing the risk of infection in domestic animals and limiting contact with wild animals. Vaccination and animal control programs that started in the 1940's have practically eliminated the domestic dog as a reservoir of rabies; however, unvaccinated dogs may still spread the disease. The vaccination of all domestic dogs, cats, and ferrets coupled with the systematic removal of stray animals that may be exposed to rabid wildlife are the basic elements of a rabies control program.

Rabies is transmitted only when the virus is introduced into bite wounds, open cuts in the skin, or onto mucous membranes, such as the eyes or mouth. Exposure to rabies is treatable by prompt care to the wound and appropriate post-exposure medicines. Prompt medical attention is very important, however, as rabies is almost always fatal without it.

The Georgia Department of Natural Resources has rigid regulations that prohibit the keeping of wild and wild/domestic hybrid animals as pets. Some animals identified by these regulations are raccoons, skunks, coyotes, foxes, and bats. More information is available on the DNR website

<http://www.georgiawildlife.com>

Small rodents such as squirrels, hamsters, guinea pigs, gerbils, chipmunks, rats, mice and lagomorphs, which include rabbits and hares, are almost never found to be infected with rabies. These animals are considered low-risk, as they have not been known to transmit rabies to humans.

Public health officials become involved in animal cases where exposure or potential exposure to rabies occurs. The role of public health is to ensure that domestic animals are vaccinated against rabies and to ensure the public is educated and informed about rabies. In many counties, public health is also responsible for collecting specimens from suspected rabid animals and coordinating testing of the specimen with the state lab. Additionally, public health officials notify individuals who have been exposed to risks and inform them of the need to seek medical care.

There is no better time than now to ensure that all of your pets are currently vaccinated. For more information about rabies, ask your veterinarian, local health department or go to

<http://dph.georgia.gov/rabies>.

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