



## District 2 Public Health

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Banks, Dawson, Forsyth, Franklin, Habersham, Hall, Hart, Lumpkin, Rabun, Stephens, Towns, Union and White Counties

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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### **AVOID WILD OR STRAY ANIMALS TO REDUCE POSSIBLE EXPOSURE TO RABIES**

GAINESVILLE, GA – Forsyth County Environmental Health was recently notified that a stray cat in the Briarwood Trail/Grove Park Lane area of Forsyth County bit and scratched three (3) humans and one family dog. The cat later tested positive for rabies. Problems of this nature often occur when people attempt to feed or rescue stray domesticated dogs and cats. If you have stray animals on your property call animal control. People should always avoid contact with unfamiliar dogs, cats, and wild animals.

Feral cats, unlike stray domesticated cats are born in the wild and should be treated as wild animals. Do not attempt to capture or feed feral cats, leave them alone. If you feed your pets outside, pick up any uneaten food so wild animals, including feral cats will not be attracted to your property.

Although the occurrence of rabies among humans has declined noticeably over the years, the disease continues among wild animals and is frequently transferred to domestic animals during an attack. 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.

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. 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. Human rabies is best prevented by reducing the risk of infection in domestic animals and limiting contact with wild animals. 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.

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.

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>

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 informed about the risks of rabies and when to seek medical attention.

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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