

# **HEALTH TIPS – MARCH 2016**

## **RABIES AWARENESS**

### **WHAT IS RABIES?**

Rabies is a very serious disease that affects the brain and spinal cord of mammals (if an animal has hair or fur, it is a mammal). Cats, dogs, raccoons, coyotes and foxes are mammals, as are people. Rabies is caused by a virus and almost always causes death.

Symptoms may include unexplained aggression, impaired locomotion, varying degrees of paralysis, and extreme depression or viciousness.

### **STRAINS OF RABIES**

There are several strains of the virus that are carried by different species of animals. A "strain" of rabies is a form of the virus that is primarily carried by a specific species of animal, known as the dominant reservoir species. Although a strain is specific to a particular species, other mammals are susceptible to that strain as well. When an animal other than the normal host species contracts the virus, it is called a spillover. In the case of the raccoon strain, which has been affecting the New England area since September of 1992, the most common spillover animals have included skunks, cats, woodchucks, and foxes. The fact that spillover occurs is cause for some concern.

### **HOW RABIES IS TRANSMITTED**

Most commonly, rabies is transmitted when an animal with rabies bites another animal or person. The rabies virus is in the saliva (spit) of infected animals. Occasionally rabies is transmitted by other forms of exposure such as contact between saliva of an infected animal and broken skin, open wounds or contact between infected saliva and mucous membranes, such as mouth or eyes.

### **AFTER EXPOSURE**

Once the virus has been introduced under the skin, it replicates at the site and spreads to the brain via the nerves and spinal cord. The time the virus takes to reach the brain is called the incubation period. This period is determined by how far the bite wound is from the head.

During the incubation period the animal is NOT infectious. After the incubation period has ended -- with the virus reaching the brain and proceeding to the salivary glands of the animal -- that animal becomes infectious and IS capable of transmitting the virus through a bite.

For dogs and cats there is a period of about three days in which an animal will shed (be able to transmit) rabies virus in its saliva, but will not be showing any neurological signs. After this, the infected animal will begin to exhibit signs of the disease and its health will deteriorate rapidly. Most likely, a dog or cat will be dead within 4 or 5 days of showing clinical signs of the disease.

## WHAT KINDS OF ANIMALS DON'T GET RABIES?

Birds, fish, reptiles (such as snakes, turtles and lizards), amphibians (such as frogs and salamanders) and insects (bugs) cannot get or spread rabies.

## IS THERE SOMETHING SPECIAL ABOUT BATS AND RABIES?

Yes. Most of the recent human cases of rabies in the US have been caused by bats. Any possible contact with bats should be taken seriously. This includes a bite or scratch, waking up with a bat in the room or finding a bat in a room with a young child or mentally impaired person. Bat teeth are so small that a person may not realize they have been bitten, so bat exposures need to be carefully evaluated.

## CAN YOU TELL IF AN ANIMAL IS RABID?

**You cannot tell if an animal has rabies just by looking at it.** Rabid animals may act strangely after the virus affects their brains, or they may seem just fine. Sometimes, rabid animals may aggressively attack people or other animals.

## WHAT PRECAUTIONS SHOULD BE USED TO PROTECT AGAINST RABIES?

There are several precautions everyone can take to avoid any possible exposures to rabies.

- **Vaccinate your pets.** The cases that usually represent the highest numbers of human exposures involve rabid domestic animals. The most common domestic animal to contract rabies is the cat. None of the cats that tested positive for rabies in Massachusetts had a current vaccination. Ask your veterinarian to be sure that your animal has a current rabies vaccination.
- **Do not let your pets roam free.** Humans are frequently exposed to rabies through handling a pet that has fought with a rabid animal. It is natural to want to console your animal after it has been in a fight. However, if any saliva from the rabid animal is left on your pet's fur, there is a definite risk of exposure.
- **Avoid any contact with wild animals, alive or dead.** The behavior of rabid animals is unpredictable. Approaching a sick animal, no matter what condition it appears to be in, is dangerous. The rabies virus can be active after the host animal dies, but it can only be transmitted if there is direct contact. If you must handle wildlife, wear gloves.

## HOW DO I KNOW IF MY PET IS CURRENTLY VACCINATED?

In order to have a valid 3-year shot, the dog or cat must have a primary series of vaccinations; 2 shots, 9-12 months apart from each other. The first shot in an animal's life will normally be given at about 3 months of age. This shot is said to be effective for one year. The animal must then go back for its second shot no sooner than 9, and no later than 12 months from the date the first shot was given. If the second shot is given in that 3-month window, it will be considered effective for 3 years. Any shot given after that will also be considered effective for 3 years. Regardless of age, unless the animal has the primary series done correctly, rabies vaccinations are only considered to be effective for 1 year.



## **DOES MASSACHUSETTS LAW REQUIRE THAT MY DOG OR CAT TO BE VACCINATED FOR RABIES?**

**Yes!** Massachusetts law requires that dogs, cats and ferrets must be vaccinated for rabies. (*See end of article for information on our upcoming low-cost rabies vaccination clinic on March 26, 2016 at the Whitinsville Fire Station!*)

## **WHEN SHOULD MY PUPPY OR KITTEN GET ITS FIRST RABIES SHOT?**

Massachusetts law requires that vaccinations must be administered by the time the animal is six months old. The second vaccination should be given between 9-12 months after the initial vaccination.

## **I BOUGHT AN OLDER DOG OR CAT, BUT WAS NOT GIVEN A CERTIFICATE OF VACCINATION FOR RABIES, WHAT SHOULD I DO?**

Take the animal to a veterinarian within 30 days of acquisition to have it vaccinated.

## **I WAS BITTEN BY A DOG OR CAT. WHAT SHOULD I DO?**

Be sure to properly clean the wound and seek medical advice. Contact the Municipal Animal Inspector through the city or town and give the Inspector as much information as possible (e.g. owner information, where the incident happened, description of animal...). *In Northbridge, the Animal Inspector works under the Board of Health – please contact us at (508)234-3272 so that we may begin the quarantine process on the biting animal. The biting animal will be quarantined (in-home) for a period of 10 days, regardless of their vaccination status. If the animal remains healthy at the end of the 10-day time frame, the biting animal will be released from quarantine (no risk of rabies transmission to the person bitten).*

## **I WAS SCRATCHED BY A CAT. CAN RABIES BE SPREAD FROM JUST A SCRATCH?**

Yes. The steps taken for a scratch would be the same as a bite wound.

## **FOR MORE INFORMATION**

**[Department of Agriculture – Division of Animal Health – Rabies Control Program](#)**

**[MDPH – Rabies Fact Sheet](#)**



**PROTECT YOUR PETS AND YOUR FAMILY  
GET YOUR PETS VACCINATED AGAINST RABIES**

**RABIES CLINIC - MARCH 26, 2016**

The Northbridge Board of Health in cooperation with Dr. Lawrence of the Agape Animal Hospital has scheduled a rabies vaccination clinic on MARCH 26, 2016 at the Whitinsville Fire Station at 193 Main Street. Cats should be brought in a carrier between Noon and 1:00 PM. Dogs on a leash can be brought between 1:00 and 2:00 PM. The cost is \$15, cash only please.

In order to obtain a 3-year booster vaccination, you **MUST** provide prior rabies certification. An UN-expired one year certificate qualifies for a three-year booster. A prior 3-year certificate, even if it has expired, also qualifies for a 3-year booster (Once a three-year, always a three-year). Without prior documentation, your pet will receive a one-year rabies vaccination.

Any questions – please call the Northbridge Board of Health at (508) 234-3272.