

## Humane Officer's Corner

### Rabies Refresher: Animal Bites and other Exposures.

One of the duties I have as a Waukesha County Humane Officer is running the rabies control program. Now, I know you might want to quit reading this article about now, because you think rabies only happens on the other side of the world. Think again! Every year I get a few positive specimens back from the Wisconsin State Lab of Hygiene and my office handles close to 500 bite cases per year. The usual critter carrying rabies disease around here is the bat, but in years past it has been found in a domestic kitten, raccoons and some skunks. So now you might be thinking, ok, so I will avoid being bitten and everything will be fine. I hope so, but I want to share some information with our readers to help make sure that is the case.

Once the weather warms, a lot of Wisconsin wildlife that snoozed all winter, wake up. Most of our calls happen in the warm weather months, starting usually in April. The bats start flying about, feeding and preparing to bear their young. Skunks and raccoons venture out to find food and teach their babies how to survive on their own. Coyotes and foxes are doing the same thing. The problems happen when humans and their pets have contact with wildlife. Humans have built our homes in very beautiful locations and have displaced the wildlife residents in many cases. The animals still live nearby, but now have the challenge of avoiding people, pets, vehicle traffic, mowers...the list goes on. Denning animals are very protective of their territory and their young. There are bound to be incidents with people living in such close proximity. If we educate ourselves, many of these incidents can be avoided. (Remember that animal exclusionary work I wrote about a few months ago?)

***For Bats:*** The guideline from the state recommends that if a bat is found in a room with a sleeping person or someone unable to express themselves, that person is **considered exposed to a rabid animal** unless the bat tests negative at the state lab. People might expect to see a big, vampire chomp mark on their body if a bat bit them. Nope! Bats have very tiny teeth, and might only scuff your skin a bit. Most of us wouldn't even notice it, but that little scuff would potentially be enough to let the rabies virus into your body. And once exposed, the skin would likely heal, the person would feel fine for a month or more, then symptoms would appear. By then, the disease is almost always fatal. The time to act is before symptoms: have my department get the bat tested or if the bat flew off, contact your doctor immediately. If you or others were sleeping in a room where a bat was found, you need to take it seriously. If your pets found the bat, there are steps to take to protect their health too. They live with you, so keeping your pets healthy is in your family's best interest!

***For Skunks, Raccoons, Woodchucks, Muskrats, Fox, Coyote and Opossum:*** Any person or domestic pet that you suspect got bitten by one of these creatures needs to either get the animal tested or contact their doctor/veterinarian to discuss getting PEP (post-exposure prophylaxis).

***Domestic Animal Dogs, Cats, and Ferrets:*** If these animals bite humans, they are ordered into quarantine where they are observed for central nervous system symptoms indicating a problem. Most quarantine last 10 days, are at the owner's home and are very uneventful. If another domestic animal bites your pet, there is no required quarantine. A police report can document the incident, but the law sees this as a "property damage" case.

*Most other Domestic Pets:*

Hamsters, guinea pigs, gerbils, mice, rats and rabbits virtually never require testing due to bites, unless the animal was acting abnormally at the time of the bite.

*Other Animals:* Any other situations are handled on a case-by-case basis. With so many exotic animals for sale globally, there are reasons to be concerned about the host of diseases and parasites such animals could be carrying. Don't buy on impulse!

A little prevention goes a long way. Keep your pets up to date on rabies vaccinations. It is easy to forget when boosters are due! If you acquire a new pet that "had all its shots", it probably got some baby vaccinations, but it is unlikely it received a rabies shot. If you can't confirm your pets' rabies vaccinations, talk to your veterinarian about vaccinating.

For people, always use some good leather gloves if you end up having to handle wildlife. Wash your hands after any exposure to wildlife! Call your local law enforcement if you see sickly wild animals anywhere near people or pets. Talk to your doctor if you suspect any risky exposures. The chances of a problem may be slim, but who wants to take a chance when your life's on the line? Teach your kids this information! They tend to like surprising pets with hugs, jump in to help critters, and these behaviors tend to get kids bitten! Hope you find this information helpful!

Stay Safe!

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