

Be alert for rabies, vaccinate your pet

UNIVERSITY PARK — Walking through a field in Blair County last month, a young boy spotted a wild skunk. Having the curiosity of most young boys, he picked up the skunk — and it promptly bit him. Later the skunk was found to have rabies.

In Wayne County recently, a man walking barefoot in house was bitten by a bat when he stepped on it. Like the skunk, the bat had rabies.

Although reported cases of animal rabies are not common in Pennsylvania, they do occur regularly. As of November 1981, 10 rabid animals had been reported in the state, fewer than the 19 cases reported in 1980 and 16 in 1979. But the broadening states of Maryland

and West Virginia are experiencing serious problems with rabies, so Pennsylvanians would be wise to have all pets vaccinated and to be alert for wild or stray animals.

Nationally the occurrence of rabies is increasing rapidly. Last year cases of animal rabies rose 85 percent over the average for the previous five years. The number of reported cases nationwide jumped 67 percent in 1979.

"These figures reflect only the confirmed cases of rabies," says L. Dwight Schwartz, Extension veterinarian at Penn State. "For every case of wild animal rabies reported, there are probably many other cases in which the animal dies and is never counted."

Bats are by far the most common carriers of rabies in Pennsylvania. Of all reported rabid animals in the last three years, 91 percent were bats. But any mammal can be infected, including household pets. The rabies virus reproduces in the salivary glands and is transmitted by saliva from infected animals, usually by biting, Schwartz notes. Dogs and cats that go outside are susceptible to the virus through contact with other animals.

"Vaccination is the best way to protect your pets against rabies," Schwartz says. "Talk to your veterinarian about vaccinations. Your pets' vaccinations must be kept up to date."

Rabies vaccinations for dogs are

effective for three years, and those for cats are effective for one year. Unlike some other states, Pennsylvania does not require vaccination for dogs and cats, although dogs three months old or older brought in from outside Pennsylvania are required by law to be vaccinated, according to Dr. E.J. Witte, director, Division of Epidemiology of the Pennsylvania Department of Health. It is up to the pet owner to make sure pets are safe from rabies.

Wild animals should never be kept as pets, Schwartz says, because rabies may be present in the animal for a long time before symptoms show up. Skunks are particularly dangerous because they may carry rabies for up to two years before any signs of the virus are evident. Humans can be infected by rabies before the animal exhibits any symptoms.

Wild animals can be vaccinated with dog or cat vaccines, but Witte warns that there is no certain evidence that these vaccines are effective on wild animals.

"Teach your children never to touch any unfamiliar animal," Schwartz says. "Children are especially susceptible to rabies if they are exposed."

Cattle can also carry the virus, which is especially dangerous because farmers and veterinarians might be exposed to the saliva of rabid cattle before they realize the animals are infected. Common signs of rabies in cattle are frequent loud bellowing, a change in voice pitch, and constipation, Schwartz says.

Rabid cattle have not been much of a problem in Pennsylvania—the last reported case was for one cow in 1973. Witte estimates that 99.9 percent of the state's cattle are not vaccinated because of the rarity of rabid cattle here.

Schwartz explains that there is no typical symptom of rabies. "Different signs occur for different species, and even among different animals of the same species. The first noticeable sign in any animal is usually a change in behavior that may seem like a digestive disorder, injury, poisoning, or a

foreign object in the mouth or throat." Because paralysis often begins in the throat, the animal will often stop eating and drinking. It may seek solitude.

After a few days, the animal will show signs of one of the two types of rabies. It will begin to be paralyzed (dumb rabies) or to act vicious (furious rabies).

"Because the signs of rabies vary, any animal behaving unusually should be avoided," Schwartz says. "If you have an animal that is behaving abnormally, call your veterinarian. If he suspects rabies, he'll tell you what to do."

Rabies is a virus that attacks the nervous system and finally the brain. There is no treatment for the virus once symptoms show up. Most animals die within 10 days of exhibiting symptoms, so Schwartz notes that there is not always cause to destroy an animal suspected of having rabies — the owner can wait and watch.

Anyone who is exposed to the saliva of a rabid animal must undergo treatment, which since the development of a new vaccine is not as unpleasant as it was in the past. Until last year, 23 inoculations were required with the old vaccine, but now only five inoculations are necessary.

Schwartz urges that any bite wound, especially one from a possibly rabid animal, should be flooded with isopropyl alcohol to prevent infection.

Witte notes that anyone who is frequently exposed to wild animals might benefit from having a pre-vaccination series of inoculations which protects the person from the virus.


Inoculations are crucial for anyone exposed to rabies because once the symptoms appear, death is almost inevitable. Witte cites only two fully documented cases in which people showed the symptoms of rabies and lived. Approximately 150 Pennsylvanians have undergone rabies treatment since June 1980, and the last case of rabies symptoms in a human in the state occurred in 1952.

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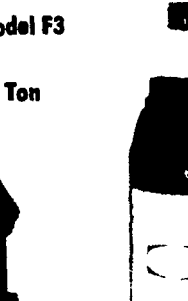
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