



EarthWatch Rhode Island



Topic: Rabies: What you need to know!

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As the weather grows warmer people and their pets are inclined to stay outdoors longer to enjoy the summer air. While this is expected, it should be noted that increased outdoor activity could increase human and pet contact with wild animals that could potentially carry rabies.

The Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management encourages people to vaccinate their pets and livestock and to take precautions against rabies.

Rabies is a deadly disease that infects the central nervous system and is caused by a virus in the saliva (spit) of infected animals. The virus can be spread to all warm-blooded animals – including humans - through contact with an infected animal's saliva. Most often rabies is spread through bites or scratches (nails can contain the animal's saliva) from an infected animal, but it can also be spread if the infected saliva makes contact with the eyes, mouth or nose. The animals most at risk for carrying rabies are raccoons, foxes, skunks, bats, cats, dogs and cattle.

The first reported case of rabies in Rhode Island was in 1994 and the reported incidents have remained high since then with over 1,300 rabies-related calls to the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management in 2005 alone.

What can Rhode Islanders do to protect themselves and their pets?

- Vaccinate pets and livestock.

Vaccinating is the best way to prevent rabies from spreading to pets. State law requires that all cats, dogs, ferrets and display animals be given a one-year primary immunization vaccine and after this are vaccinated every two years. Owners who do not have these animals vaccinated can be fined up to \$500 per animal. The Rhode Island Veterinary Medical Association



State Veterinarian, Scott N. Marshall and Director W. Michela Sullivan prepare to administer a rabies vaccination to this young calf. Papi.

(RIVMA) and local communities sponsor a number of rabies clinics each year. For information on rabies vaccine clinics, contact your local animal control officer or RIVMA.

And, although not law except for show and Exhibition (i.e. Zoos, Fairs and Shows), DEM highly recommends that people vaccinate livestock yearly, as there are no two-year vaccinations approved for livestock. Livestock generally do not have the same human supervision as pets and are likely to come into contact with wild animals more often. Several licensed veterinarians will make house calls to vaccinate livestock.

- Minimize contact with wild animals by:
 - a. Keep pets confined, preferably on a leash or in a fenced area
 - b. Keep pet foods indoors – Feeding pets outside is a major attraction for wildlife.
 - c. Secure garbage to prevent attracting hungry wildlife
 - d. Do not feed wildlife and remove bird feeders if necessary. Tossing things like bread, popcorn, nuts and crackers outside to feed birds or squirrels can become an attraction for other unwanted wildlife.
 - e. Eliminate or close up potential denning sites such as wood piles, rock piles, elevated sheds, openings under concrete slabs and porches, and crawl spaces under houses.

- Spread the word. Tell your family that it is important to stay away from wildlife or from dogs and cats that are unfamiliar to them.

- Report sighting of any wild or stray animals behaving strangely or appear to be sick. Some rabid animals will appear hostile and aggressive, while others will seem tame and shy or generally sick. Some rabid animals will also foam at the mouth. Also, it is important to keep in mind that if you see a nocturnal animal out during the day (such as skunks or raccoons) this *does not* necessarily mean that they have rabies; they may just be hungry or affected by weather patterns. Look for signs of sickness before jumping to the conclusion of rabies. Call DEM's Division of Enforcement at 222-3070 or your local animal control office.

If an animal bites:

- If a person is bitten by a cat, dog, or wild animal, wash the wound with soap and water for five minutes and see a physician immediately.

- If a pet has bitten someone or has been bitten, confine the pet and call your animal control officer.

- If the wound is from a wild or stray animal, DO NOT try to capture the animal. Contact your local police department or DEM's Division of Enforcement.

Illustrative Cases

Two cases of rabies in early June illustrate that rabies is alive and well in Rhode Island and how it is important to take steps to prevent rabies.

Farmer and State Senator Kevin Breene learned first hand about the importance of vaccinating his pets and livestock against rabies. Senator Breene encountered a raccoon attacking the beloved family cat. Although the cat was vaccinated, it died from its injuries. Fortunately, his livestock had been vaccinated and were protected against rabies.

A second case involved unvaccinated polo horses. One horse became infected with rabies after being bitten by a wild animal. The horse later bit its caretaker. The infected horse died and was submitted for rabies testing and the rest of the horses are quarantined for six months where they will be monitored for signs of rabies. Also, because the family had close contact with the horses they are undergoing a series of rabies shots in case of infection.

Resources for Viewers:

Rabies Hotline: 1-800-482-7878

DEM's Website: www.dem.ri.gov

RIVMA's website: www.rivma.org

Interviews:

- W. Michael Sullivan, Director, DEM
- Scott N. Marshall, DEM's State Veterinarian (Shown below on left, being interviewed by Channel 10's R.J. Heim)
- Farmer, West Greenwich Town Administrator and Senator Kevin Breene (below, right)

