

Infectious Diseases of Raccoons

Raccoons in the United States are known to carry infectious diseases that can be transmitted to humans and animals that have contact with raccoons or their waste. Both young and mature raccoons can shed viruses, bacteria and parasites that when exposed to humans and animals can result in infections and disease. People should not handle raccoons or their waste without protection and appropriate training.

Raccoons expose humans to disease when handled or if there is exposure to bodily secretions or feces. Saliva, urine, feces and bites or scratches are the most common routes of exposure. Contamination of the environment and any materials used by the raccoons can also be a source. People who handle raccoons, who are bitten, scratched or exposed to their waste, should be aware of the potential health hazards.

Any person who has handled a raccoon of any age should consult a physician immediately. Individuals who have participated in the handling, care, feeding and cleaning of any raccoons should be evaluated for exposure to the following diseases and be informed of all the potential human health risks caused by wildlife and raccoons.

- **Rabies:** Rabies is a virus that is spread by contact with the saliva of a rabid animal or by being scratched or bitten by a rabid animal. Raccoons are one of the most common species to carry rabies.
- **Baylisascaris procyonis:** (Bay-lis-asc-aris) The Raccoon Ascarid or roundworm is a parasite of the intestines of raccoons that sheds large numbers of eggs in the feces. Feces contaminated with eggs can become infective to humans after 2-4 weeks of incubation. Exposure to feces during handling, feeding and cleaning can cause a serious disease known as Visceral Larval Migrants and infection of the central nervous system. Oral ingestion of infective stages of eggs is the primary route of exposure.
- **Giardiasis:** Giardia species is a microscopic protozoal infection that can be transmitted by a wide variety of animals. Raccoons can carry this organism in their feces and contaminate water, soil and surfaces. Humans can contract Giardia by ingestion of infective cysts from contaminated animals and sources. Patients can develop severe gastrointestinal symptoms.
- **Leptospirosis:** Leptospira species is a bacterial infection that many animals and humans can contract and transmit. There are several different species of Leptospira that are found in wildlife, which is the primary source of contamination of the environment with these bacteria. Raccoons can shed Leptospirosis in their urine and secretions. Exposure of these excretions to open wounds or orally can cause infection to humans.
- **Other Diseases:** Other bacterial diseases (such as Salmonella or E. Coli), fungus and rare parasites can also be a risk for illness in humans. People who handle, feed and clean up waste should be aware of the potential health hazards and practice aggressive hygiene and sanitation to prevent exposure of skin, eyes, mouth and body to infection. Physicians can assess individuals who may have been exposed and recommend appropriate actions to prevent disease.

For more information on raccoons and their diseases please visit the Center for Disease Control and Prevention website at www.cdc.gov and search under Raccoon Zoonosis or the specific disease name. Please call the Office of the Rhode Island State Public Health Veterinarian at the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, 401-222-2781, for other information.