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PROTECT AGAINST ANIMAL BITES, RABIES EXPOSURE



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PENSACOLA – The Florida Department of Health in Escambia County (FDOH-Escambia) urges residents and visitors to protect themselves from the risk of rabies exposure by avoiding contact with wild and stray animals. A fox recently attacked an individual, during the daytime, in the area of Dog Track Road in Escambia County, Florida. FDOH-Escambia’s environmental health specialists collected tissue samples from the fox which were used by the state laboratory to confirm the presence of the rabies virus.

Rabies is a viral disease that infects the central nervous system. Without proper treatment, rabies can cause brain infection and death. Rabies is transmitted by a rabid animal by a bite, a scratch, or by contact with mucous membranes such as the eyes, nose, or mouth. A series of “rabies shots” can protect a bite victim from developing the rabies infection, if given soon after the bite occurs.

“Rabies is a fatal infection but is preventable,” notes FDOH-Escambia’s director, Dr. John J. Lanza. “It is important to not feed or pet wild and stray animals, to avoid animals that appear to be acting strangely, and to keep pets vaccinated against rabies. Persons who are bitten by a wild animal or an animal who has not been vaccinated against rabies should seek immediate medical care. Proper medical treatment of an animal bite can be life-saving.”

In Florida, raccoons, foxes, bats, and cats are the animals most frequently diagnosed with rabies. Other animals that are at high risk for rabies include dogs, bobcats, skunks, and otters. Because of their proximity to people, stray and unvaccinated cats and dogs pose a special risk.

You cannot always tell if an animal has rabies by looking at it. To protect yourself and your loved ones against rabies follow these steps:

- Teach your children not to go near wild and stray animals, and never keep them as pets.
- Vaccinate your dog, cat, ferret, or horse to protect against rabies. Keep vaccinations up-to-date.
- Do not feed your pets outside. The food may attract wild animals.
- Make sure your garbage is securely covered. Open garbage attracts wild and stray animals.
- Spay or neuter your pet to reduce its tendency to roam or fight.
- Do not let your pets roam freely or allow them to interact with wild or stray animals. Keep them in a fenced yard or on a leash at all times.
- Call Escambia County Animal Control, at 850-595-0097, to remove stray animals from your neighborhood.

- Prevent bats from entering living quarters or occupied spaces in homes, churches, schools, and other similar areas, where they might come into contact with people and pets.
- If your pet is bitten by another animal, immediately seek veterinary assistance for the animal and contact Escambia County Animal Control.
- If you are bitten by a wild animal, or by any animal that is acting strangely, seek medical care as soon as possible so that a physician can evaluate your risk of rabies infection and administer the rabies vaccine if appropriate.

FDOH-Escambia's Environmental Health division investigates animal bite reports, tests animals for rabies through the state laboratory, and orders animal quarantine as necessary. For more information, or to report an animal bite, contact the FDOH-Escambia Environmental Health office at 850-595-6700 or visit www.EscambiaHealth.com.

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