

## 04/20/18 Rabies: No Cure, Only Prevention

It seems rather strange in this world of scientific magic where so much has been achieved that we can't help a person who contracts rabies. A person gets rabies; that person dies. We can only prevent it. We can prevent it by reducing the cases among animals, by being mindful of our behaviors and, if we have been exposed to rabies, we can prevent the disease with quick medical attention.

Each year nature reminds us that it is time to vaccinate our pets against rabies. Our cats and dogs will be out more often and the foxes and raccoons will begin to explore their surroundings with their young. Vaccinating our pets reduces the incidence of this virus and it brings great peace of mind knowing that we have protected them. Each year, thousands of pets, mostly cats, are euthanized to test for the rabies virus, for the only way to test is to examine the brain and, sadly, many cats give their life to rabies research by becoming a statistic.

While April is rabies awareness month, last year we had the vaccination clinic in June for the first time, to remind people to license their dog. Halifax will have its annual Rabies Clinic with Dr. Keith Hopkins, on June 2, from 9:00 a.m. to 10:30 a.m., at the Highway Barn. The cost is \$15 and \$13 for seniors.

Connecting the dog license with the rabies vaccination is one of the most successful health promotion programs. While other countries have unvaccinated wild dogs spreading the disease and killing about 60,000 people each year, it is rare in the United States, with 1 to 3 cases per year and a third of those were contracted outside of the U.S.

A rabies clinic is not a spring tradition everywhere. It is important for us, though, for New England sees more cases of rabies than in other parts of the U.S. because of an epizootic (an epidemic that occurs in animals) among raccoons. Massachusetts' vaccination program through vaccine-filled fish bait, dropped in the wild for raccoons, has been very helpful in turning back the tide of this animal epidemic. Yet, it is still here. Its deadly potential calls for awareness. Exposure calls for urgency.

As people will be outdoors more often in the spring, we increase our chances, just as our pets do, of crossing paths with some form of wildlife. Raccoons, skunks, foxes, coyotes and bats have the highest incidence of rabies in our area. This is the time to remind our children, "Pat your own. Leave others alone." That rule is not just for children, though. Just last week, someone from Halifax had to receive the post exposure vaccinations for rabies, after being bitten in the face while playing with a loose dog at Nantasket beach. The dog ran away and so, there was no way to discover vaccination history or to quarantine it.

In addition to being mindful that wonderful wildlife is to be watched from a distance, it is a good idea to know a few basics about the disease so that if there is exposure, you can understand the urgency of that situation. The disease is a virus carried

in the saliva, entering the central nervous system of the host through a bite or a non-bite exposure, eventually causing a fatal case of encephalomyelitis. Whenever a person or pet receives an animal bite, immediate washing of the wound with soap and water is the first line of defense. It greatly reduces the risk of contracting rabies.

It is important to understand that the saliva can also enter a new host by being aerosolized into the eyes or other mucous membranes, in other words, by a rabid animal spitting at you or your pet. Another possible route for a non-bite exposure would be through contact with the saliva left on your pet during a fight. Contact on your skin would not constitute an exposure but the saliva entering a cut or your eyes or mouth, would. Therefore, awareness of the need to avoid those possibilities through careful hygienic practices is in order.

When there has been even the possibility of an exposure to rabies, such as “a bite of unknown origin”, as the veterinarians’ reports say, animals are quarantined and watched. Enough research has been done for cats and dogs for us to be confident of our safety with the quarantine. If the animal is healthy at the end, so aren’t the people. If the animal needs to be tested, there is a window of opportunity to wait before receiving the shots, as the lab knows the importance of this and we have the results in a couple days.

Therefore, the local board of health, animal inspector, animal control officer, police dispatchers and police officers must be well informed and ask a lot of questions when people call in to report animal bites and strange acting animals. We need to know if there was any chance of exposure. If there was any chance, then we cannot afford to take any more. We test, and we treat or we quarantine and watch; your life may depend on those actions.

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