

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 when the early bloomers are announcing the arrival of spring, 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.

Halifax will have its annual Rabies Clinic with Dr. Keith Hopkins, on April 26, from 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m., at the Highway Barn. We usually try to have the clinic at least one day earlier than the previous year's so that many animals will be eligible for the shot counting as a three-year booster. However, after many years' worth of April clinics, we were finding ourselves back in March in order to meet that deadline of "one day earlier". It's way too cold in March and, so, this is a catch-up year and all the pets will receive a one-year shot. Oh, well, at least the paperwork will be easier!

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 fish bait dropped in the wild for raccoons has been very successful in turning back the tide of this animal epidemic, yet, it is still here and its deadly potential calls for awareness and 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."

In addition to being mindful that wildlife is wonderful but it is only for watching 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 that is carried in the saliva, entering the central nervous system of the host through a bite or a non-bite exposure, causing an encephalomyelitis that is almost always fatal. 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 for ten days and people should high tail it to their doctor for medical advice on receiving the series of post exposure shots. If the animal can be tested, there is a window of opportunity to wait before receiving the shots or, the shots can be discontinued if the results come back as negative. This is why the local board of health and animal control officers and police dispatchers must be well informed and ask a lot of questions when people call in to report dog bites and strange acting animals. We need to know whether or not there was any chance of exposure. If there was any chance, then we cannot afford to take any more. We test and we treat; your life may depend on those actions.

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