

RABIES...

A very misunderstood disease that every pet owner should take seriously. A contagious infection of the central nervous system, the virus usually enters the body through a bite from a rabid animal. The exchange of bodily fluids, such as saliva can transmit the virus also. Any warm-blooded animal is susceptible to the rabies virus. In Delaware, the disease is most common in raccoons, skunks, fox, cats and dogs. A few cases were reported in bats.

Why are raccoons the #1 carrier of the rabies virus? Because they adapt well in any habitat and are very curious animals. They stand up to, rather than run away from challenge, crossing the paths of many animals. Similar to the raccoon, a skunk usually never runs away from a threat. That makes them an easy target also. Rodents, such as mice, rats, squirrels and chipmunks rarely become infected with rabies because once they are bitten; they usually go into shock and die. Reptiles and turtles do not get rabies because they are cold-blooded animals. Birds don't get rabies; they are not susceptible to it.

The course of rabies in animals can take two forms, "furious" rabies or "dumb" rabies. After being infected by rabies, symptoms may not become visible for three weeks to four months. During this period of time, the infection is a virus that then becomes contagious to others. The last ten days of a rabid animal's life is when the disease can most likely infect other animals. The first visible symptom of "furious" rabies is that of a personality change. The animal then runs amuck attacking and biting every living thing it comes in contact with. Extreme thirst occurs but spasms in the larynx prohibit the animal to swallow fluids. Foaming of the mouth can occur. Convulsions begin and death results. In "dumb" rabies, the virus attacks the muscles of the jaw and larynx in the early stages, thus paralyzing the animal's ability to swallow which causes foaming of the mouth. Unable to control facial movements, the animal appears "dumb". Death occurs quietly.

Can a rabid animal transmit the virus to human beings? YES! Rabies can be transmitted to humans via exposure from a bite or the exchange of bodily fluids. Although a bite from an infected animal is the most obvious route, being exposed to body fluids (sneezing, licking, etc) via a cut or into your eyes is also a possibility. This is why it is very important that you do not handle a wild animal, even a baby, with bare hands. Rabies can be passed on from mother to young when the mother licks her babies.

If you have any questions about a possible rabies exposure, contact the Division of Public Health Rabies Hot Line at 1-866-972-9705.

Vaccinate ALL pets which could be susceptible to contacting the virus. Puppies and kittens as young as four months of age can receive their first inoculation.

DO NOT TOUCH ANY WILD ANIMAL. They can be dangerous and should not be handled by humans. Even those cute little furry babies can carry the rabies virus and pass it on to you, your family or your pets. If an animal that you think has rabies bites you, wash the area with warm soapy water thoroughly for an extended period of time. Contact your doctor immediately. If able to capture or destroy the animal that bit you, do so taking precautions against damaging the head. Testing is performed on the brain tissue and at the present time that is the only way to get accurate results. If unable to capture or destroy the animal safely, contact the Kent County S.P.C.A at 302-698-3006.