Rabies has been the talk of many media outlets lately. Whether in the newspaper, on television or scrolling across your computer screen you may have heard or read about the disease. This month, we delve into what rabies really is and what you can do to prevent and avoid it.

Rabies is a viral infection of the central nervous system. It is invariably fatal after signs appear, excluding rare exceptions.

“Death is imminent once the animal is exhibiting signs of rabies,” says Yvonne Bellay, DVM, MS, the animal welfare programs manager and an epidemiologist at the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection.

Dr. Bellay also mentions no effective treatments currently exist, making prevention key.

“All dogs, cats (including those that never go outside) and ferrets should be vaccinated against rabies,” states Dr. Bellay. “Vaccinating pets protects the pets against rabies and serves as a barrier to protect people against rabies.”

People can contract rabies through the bite of an infected animal. Wisconsin wildlife are the most commonly infected animals, but dogs, cats, horses and cattle can also contract the disease. Therefore, it is vital for veterinarians to work to prevent rabies exposures and educate the public about the disease.

“Veterinarians are a critical part of educating clients on the importance of keeping vaccinations current for dogs, cats and ferrets, what actions to take to prevent exposure to rabies, and what steps should be taken after a known or potential exposure to a rabid animal,” explains Dr. Bellay.

If you find a bat in your home or a skunk in your yard, confine the animal if possible and call your local animal control. “Automatic exposure” is assumed in any case where there is a pet, child or sleeping person in your home with the suspicious animal, and the animal should be sent

for testing to confirm a negative rabies test. Bat bites are very small and easily go unnoticed if they occur during sleep. A negative rabies test on the animal in question determines that no post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) treatment is needed for pets or people present in the home. If the animal cannot be tested, PEP injections are recommended.

The law requires quarantine of unvaccinated pets that come in contact with bats or other wild animals.

Plenty of soap and water should be used immediately to thoroughly cleanse the area if an animal or human is bitten or scratched.

“Rabies is transmitted only when the virus is introduced into open cuts or wounds in skin or mucous membranes,” describes Dr. Bellay. “The majority of exposures are due to the bite of an infected animal that is shedding rabies virus in its saliva.”

Wisconsin law requires dogs to be vaccinated against rabies. Both dogs and cats older than 12 weeks of age can be vaccinated. One year later, dogs and cats should receive their next vaccine, with subsequent vaccinations every three years. Depending on the chosen vaccine, cats may need to be boostered annually. Rabies-vaccinated ferrets are licensed for a one-year period, and therefore need annual boosters as well.

Horses should be vaccinated annually following a 2-dose series given as a foal. Since other livestock are not routinely vaccinated for rabies, preventive measures include discouraging stray dogs and cats and wildlife from living in and around the premise. Do not intentionally feed stray animals or wildlife, or allow garbage to remain open to scavenging animals. All dogs and cats kept on a farm should be vaccinated against rabies.

Extra precaution should be taken by those working with livestock showing signs of neurologic disease. Although rabies infections are rare, avoid contact with saliva from a potentially infected animal and isolate it from the herd. If the animal dies, it should be submitted for testing through the veterinarian to the Wisconsin State Laboratory of Hygiene.

In Wisconsin, skunks and bats are most commonly infected animals. According to Dr. Bellay, in 2011 there were 19 positive bats and three positive skunks reported. In 2010, there were 27 positive bats and one positive skunk.

Veterinarians are an important part in the line of defense against rabies, protecting animal and public health through vaccination and surveillance of the companion and food animals they serve. To learn more about rabies and its prevention, contact your local WVMA member veterinarian. Find one online at www.wvma.org .