Do Your Part to Reduce Rabies Risk, Vaccinate!

Each year 55,000 people die worldwide from Rabies. The fatal, zoonotic (can be transferred from animals to humans) disease attacks the nervous system of mammals.

Thankfully, in the U.S., responsible animal owners have helped protect animal and human life by having their pets vaccinated against the disease, reducing the number of human rabies cases to only three per year.
"This low number is partially a result of the availability of effective preventive treatment after a person sustains a potential exposure," explains Dr. James Kazmierczak, State Public Health Veterinarian for the Wisconsin Division of Public Health. "It is estimated that about 40,000 persons receive the preventive rabies shots each year in this country."

Although the number of human rabies cases has decreased over the past several decades because of stray animal control ordinances and better rabies vaccination coverage for pets, it is still a disease of significant public health concern.

"Rabies is a disease that is invariably fatal, and it remains a public health risk because the rabies virus is maintained in wildlife reservoirs such as bats and skunks," Dr. Kazmierczak explains.

You can help reduce this risk by protecting your pets and your family.

- Vaccinate your pets against rabies. Wisconsin law makes rabies vaccination mandatory for all dogs. For your pet to be considered legally vaccinated, state law requires that a veterinarian or a certified veterinary technician (under veterinarian supervision) administer the rabies vaccination to the animal.
- In the United States, rabid cats are more than twice as numerous as rabid dogs, so vaccination of cats is strongly advised by public health agencies. Some town, county and other local ordinances require cats to be vaccinated. Contact your local government to find out more on cat rabies vaccination requirements.
- Do not attract animals to your home by feeding them. Keep tight fitting lids on garbage cans.
- Keep garage and shed doors closed, and cap all chimneys so animals do not nest in these areas or enter your home.
- Avoid contact with stray or wild animals, even if they are babies. Teach children to stay away from stray or wild animals as well.
- Contact your physician if you awaken in a bedroom with a bat, or if a bat is discovered in a room with a previously unattended young child. Even if you think no bite has occurred, preventive treatment may be necessary. If possible, try to capture the bat using a container or heavy blanket, so it can be tested for rabies. This can often eliminate the need to receive the preventive rabies shots.
- Some wild animals have become very accustomed to living near people. Always be cautious because you cannot tell for sure if an animal has rabies just by looking at it.

If a person is bitten do the following:

1. Wash the wound immediately with soap and running water for at least ten minutes.
2. Contact your local public health agency or local law enforcement and see a physician immediately, even for minor wounds. Post- exposure immunizations may need to be given to prevent onset of the disease. However, these shots may be avoided if the biting animal can be observed by a veterinarian.
3. Immediately confine the pet and contact the local animal control officer or public health agency and check with your pet's veterinarian for treatment and rabies vaccination history.
4. If the bite is from a wild or stray animal, do not try to capture the animal unless you are sure you can do so without incurring further injury. If bitten by an owned animal, obtain the owner's name, address, and phone number to pass along to public health officials or to law enforcement.
5. Do not destroy an animal which has bitten a human or other animal. Contact the local animal control officer, public health agency, or law enforcement. Observation of the animal usually eliminates the need for the rabies preventive shots.

If Your Pet has been bitten do the following:

1. Consult your veterinarian immediately and report bite to local animal control authorities.
2. If your pet has a current vaccination it should be revaccinated immediately, kept under the owner's control and observed for a period as specified by state law or local ordinances. Animals with expired vaccinations will need to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.
3. If the animal has never been vaccinated and is exposed to a rabid animal, it may need to be euthanized or placed in strict isolation for six months depending on species.

Everyone needs to help protect the public and our pets from rabies, so keep these tips in mind!

For more information on this topic contact your local WVMA-member veterinarian or the WVMA at wvma@wvma.org.