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MEDIA CONTACT: Charlette Murphy
desk (850) 595-6272

Residents Urged to Protect Against Rabies Exposure

PENSACOLA – Health officials urge residents to avoid contact with wild and stray animals to protect themselves from the risk of rabies exposure. In Florida, raccoons, foxes, bats and cats are the animals most frequently diagnosed with rabies. Other animals that are at high risk for rabies include dogs, bobcats, skunks, and otters. Because of their proximity to people, stray and unvaccinated cats and dogs pose a special risk.

Rabies is a viral disease that infects the central nervous system, ultimately causing brain infection and death. It is transmitted by a rabid animal through a bite, scratch, or contact with mucous membranes such as the eyes, nose, or mouth. A series of “rabies shots” can protect the bitten individual from developing the rabies infection, if given soon after a person is bitten.

“Rabies is a fatal infection but is preventable,” notes Dr. John J. Lanza, Director of the Escambia County Health Department. “It is important not to feed or pet wild and stray animals, to avoid animals that appear to be acting strangely, and to keep pets vaccinated against rabies. If an individual does get bitten by a rabid animal, they should seek immediate medical care because rabies vaccination can be life saving.”

The Environmental Health Division of the Escambia County Health Department investigates animal bite reports, tests animals for rabies through the state laboratory, and orders animal quarantine as necessary.

You can’t always tell by looking if an animal has rabies. To protect yourself and your loved ones against rabies follow these steps.

- Teach your children not to go near wild and stray animals, and never keep them as pets.
- Vaccinate your dog, cat, ferret or horse to protect against rabies.
- Don’t feed your pets outside. The food may attract wild animals.
- Make sure your garbage is securely covered. Open garbage attracts wild and stray animals.
- Don’t let your pets roam freely. Keep them in a fenced yard or on a leash at all times.
- Spay or neuter your pet to reduce its tendency to roam or fight.
- If you get bitten by an animal that is acting strangely or by a wild animal, seek medical care as soon as possible so that a physician can evaluate your risk of rabies infection and administer rabies vaccine if appropriate.

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