

NEWS

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Department of Public Health and Human Services

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Public health officials issue a rabies reminder

State and local public health officials are reminding Montanans to be aware of the risk for exposure to rabies as summer approaches. Encounters between humans and wild animals often increase in spring and summer months because of the time spent hiking and engaging in other outdoor activities.

Rabies is a fatal disease. The rabies virus is carried in the saliva of infected warm-blooded mammals and is usually transmitted to people and other animals through a bite.

Bats are a great concern in Montana because a bite may not be noticeable, and they are distributed statewide. From 2013-2017, 95 animals tested positive for rabies at the Montana Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory, and 71 (75%) were bats.

In addition to bats, 21 (22%) of the rabies positive animals from 2013-2017 were skunks. This demonstrates these animals are also at high risk to develop rabies. Rarely, domesticated animals, such as dogs, cats, and livestock, can be infected from exposures to bats and skunks.

"Rabies can be prevented by avoiding physical contact with stray or wild animals and seeking preventive treatment if you think you have been exposed," said Jen Fladager, a nurse with the Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS).

Fladager notes that if someone is bitten by a domestic dog, cat or ferret, the animal can be observed for signs of rabies, almost always avoiding the need for treatment. If an animal cannot be located for observation or testing, a person may need to undergo a series of shots to prevent rabies. In 2017, administration of treatment to prevent infection was recommended to over 200 individuals by local public health officials.

"Prevention of a potential exposure to rabies, and ultimately a human rabies case, is our primary objective," Fladager added. "In Montana, the last case of rabies in a human was diagnosed in 1997. This shows veterinarians' efforts to vaccinate pets and public health's efforts to identify and treat people who have been exposed are effective."

DPHHS and the Department of Livestock remind everyone of the following rabies prevention tips:

Do not feed or handle wild animals, especially bats. Teach children never to touch wild animals or handle bats, even dead ones. Ask children to tell an adult if they see or find a bat.

Avoid animal bites from domestic animals. Teach children to never approach an unfamiliar animal and to always ask an owner's permission prior to petting an animal. Another common source of bite exposures are adults attempting to rescue a wild animal. Sick or injured animals that have not been socialized can become aggressive when someone attempts to handle them.

Vaccinate dogs and cats against rabies. Cats are especially susceptible to rabies exposure as a result of more contact with wild animals than dogs. All dogs and cats should have a current rabies certificate.

Bat-proof your house. Take steps to prevent bats from entering the living areas of your home. Put screens on all windows, doors and chimneys to prevent bats from entering. You can prevent bats from roosting in attics or buildings by covering outside entry points, loosely hanging clear plastic sheeting or bird netting over these areas. To avoid trapping any young bats who will die or try to make their way into your rooms, seal the openings permanently in the fall after bats have left for the season.

“Any bat that has physical contact with a person, or is found in an area where contact may have occurred but gone undetected, such as a bedroom with a sleeping adult or child, should be tested for rabies when possible,” Fladager said. “Do not damage the head of the bat, because the brain is needed for the rabies test. If you or your child has any contact with a bat or find a bat in your home, or are bitten or scratched by any wild or stray animal, contact your health care provider for appropriate follow-up.”

Watch for abnormal wild animal behavior. Most wild animals avoid humans and seeing skunks and bats during the daytime is rare. If you see an animal acting strangely, leave it alone and contact law enforcement or an animal control agency if you think it may pose a danger.

For additional information on rabies visit the DPHHS website at www.dphhs.gov or contact your local health department.