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Rabies alert issued in Sarasota County

The Sarasota County Health Department issued a rabies alert today following confirmation that the otter that attacked two people in Venice tested positive for rabies. Another otter tested positive for rabies in mid-February after attacking two horses in Sarasota County.

Alerts are designed to increase public awareness about the danger of rabies.

Rabies is a deadly viral disease affecting the nervous system. The virus is spread through saliva and can be passed to another animal or a person, usually through a bite. Infection may also occur if the saliva enters open wounds, the mouth, or eyes of another animal or person.

"To prevent rabies, all domestic animals should be vaccinated against rabies and everyone should avoid contact with wildlife," Chuck Henry, the county's environmental health administrator, said.

The vast majority of rabies cases occur in wild animals like raccoons, skunks, feral cats, bobcats, bats, coyotes, otters and foxes. Domestic animals including cats, dogs and ferrets are at risk if not vaccinated.

There is no treatment for rabies after symptoms of the disease appear. The rabies vaccine regimen provides immunity after an exposure or for protection before an exposure occurs.

People who are bitten by an animal are urged to go to a hospital, family doctor or county health department for immediate medical attention. The bite site should be washed with soap and running water for five to ten minutes.

The Sarasota County Health Department urges the public to take these important steps to prevent the exposure to rabies:

- Pet owners are urged to keep rabies vaccinations up to date for their dogs, cats and ferrets. Pets can be immunized with one-year or three-year vaccinations.
- Prevent bats from entering living quarters or occupied spaces in homes, churches and schools, where they might come in contact with people and pets. If you find a bat in your home, contact Animal Services or the health department.
- Be cautious around wildlife displaying suspicious signs of behavior, such as unusual aggression and/or the lack of fear of humans and unusual daylight activity. Report them to Sarasota County Animal Services at 941-861-9500.
- Do not handle or feed wild animals such as raccoons, bats, skunks and foxes.
- Never adopt wild animals or bring them into your home. Don't try to nurse sick animals to health. Call animal control or an animal rescue agency for assistance.

- Feed your pets indoors.
- Secure outside garbage in covered containers to avoid attracting wild animals or unintentionally attracting them with open garbage cans, litter or pet food.
- Don't allow your pets to run free. If a wild animal bites your pet, seek veterinary assistance for the animal immediately.
- Don't use your hands to break up a fight between animals.
- Call your local animal control agency to remove stray animals from your neighborhood.
- For questions regarding the health of an animal, contact a veterinarian.

For more information on rabies, go to the Florida Department of Health Web site at <http://www.doh.state.fl.us/environment/medicine/rabies/rabies-index.html> or contact the Sarasota County Health Department, Environmental Health office at 941-861-6133.

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