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## Local health officials join in global rabies prevention initiative

In observance of World Rabies Day on Sept. 28, the Sarasota County Health Department has launched a new [rabies Web page](#), and will be distributing educational reminders to residents and visitors about how to reduce rabies risk while enjoying nature.

“We saw this as an opportunity to highlight the rabies prevention and control efforts in our community, while teaming up with people around the world towards a common goal,” said Quintin Clark, who oversees the rabies prevention program at the Sarasota County Health Department.

Founded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Alliance for Rabies Control, the World Rabies Day initiative aims to bring together relevant partners to address rabies prevention and control.

“This is a coordinated effort to let the world know that this disease can be readily prevented through education, pet vaccination and increased human awareness as to proper wound management and administration of rabies vaccination after an exposure has occurred,” said Dr. Deborah Briggs, Executive Director for the Alliance for Rabies Control.

In the United States, the greatest achievement in rabies control and prevention occurred half a century ago, with effective implementation of dog vaccination, licensing and stray dog control. Health officials warn that we cannot let our guard down with rabies. Rabies is ever-present in wildlife, which can expose our pets and possibly our family members.

In Florida, raccoons, bats and foxes, and unvaccinated cats are the animals most frequently diagnosed with rabies. Other animals that are at high risk for rabies include skunks, otters, coyotes, bobcats and stray or unvaccinated dogs and ferrets.

Rabies is transmitted through exposure to the saliva and nervous tissue from a rabid animal through a bite, scratch, or contact with mucous membranes such as the eyes, nose, or mouth. Sarasota County Health Department works with Sarasota County Animal Services in responding to incidents of animal bites, testing animals for rabies through the Department of Health state laboratory, and quarantining animals as necessary.

Sarasota County Health Department also investigates animal bites that are reported to Sarasota County Animal Services, and provides rabies vaccinations to victims of animal bites, the only known effective treatment for rabies prevention in humans.

According to Sarasota County Animal Services, there were 561 bites from dogs and 170 cat bites during the past 12 months in Sarasota County. However, health officials caution that the actual number may be quite a bit higher since not everyone who is bitten reports the bite to Sarasota County Animal Services. Bites commonly occur when people feed or adopt raccoons as pets or handle bats, stray dogs and feral cats, attempt to break up fights between pets and other animals, rescue and assist injured animals and walk pets late at night.

During the past 12 months, 54 people were potentially exposed to rabies and received rabies post-exposure prophylaxis through the Sarasota County Health Department.

"Rabies prevention starts with the animal owner," advises Tom Higginbotham, Environmental Health Director for the Sarasota County Health Department. "We recommend that people vaccinate dogs, cats, ferrets and any other animal that has regular contact with humans, such as horses."

The following are steps you can take to protect yourself and your loved ones against rabies:

- Keep rabies vaccinations up to date for all pets.
- Keep your pets under direct supervision so they do not come in contact with wild animals. If your pet is bitten by a wild animal, seek veterinary assistance for the animal immediately and contact Sarasota County Animal Services at 941-861-9500.
- Call Animal Services to remove any stray animals from your neighborhood.
- Spay or neuter your pets to help reduce the number of unwanted pets that may not be properly cared for or regularly vaccinated.
- Do not handle, feed, or unintentionally attract wild animals with open garbage cans or litter.
- Never adopt wild animals or bring them into your home.
- Teach children never to handle unfamiliar animals, wild or domestic, even if they appear friendly.
- Prevent bats from entering living quarters or occupied spaces in homes, churches, schools and other similar areas where they might come in contact with people and pets.

Unusual acting animals should be reported to Sarasota County Animal Services at 941-861-9500 for handling. People who are bitten or scratched by domestic or wild animals, as well as strays, should report the incident to their doctor immediately, as well as to Sarasota County Animal Services and their local health department. The contact number to report an animal bite to the Sarasota County Health Department is 941-861-6133.

Additional information is available online at [www.sarasotahealth.org](http://www.sarasotahealth.org) and at [www.worldrabiesday.org](http://www.worldrabiesday.org), or by calling 941-861-6133.