

Sept. 18, 2014



Health Officials Encourage Pet Vaccinations on World Rabies Day

--Rabies is preventable --

SARASOTA — In recognition of World Rabies Day on Sept. 28, Sarasota County is emphasizing the importance of pet vaccinations to prevent rabies transmission. Rabies prevention can be exercised through ensuring adequate vaccination of pets and farm animals, avoiding contact with wild animals and educating individuals at risk.

The animal species carrying rabies most frequently in Florida are raccoons, bats, foxes and unvaccinated outside cats. “Vaccination is the most crucial tool in fighting the spread of rabies among our animal population,” said Florida Department of Health in Sarasota County Environmental Health Director Tom Higginbotham. “Rabies can be prevented but not cured. Florida law requires that pet cats, dogs and ferrets be vaccinated against rabies as the primary way to safeguard our community from this deadly disease.”

According to Sarasota County Sheriff’s Office Animal Services, there were 605 dog bites and 197 cat bites during the past 12 months in Sarasota County. This compares to 561 bites from dogs and 170 cat bites during the previous year.

Health officials caution that the actual number of bites may be much higher since not everyone who is bitten reports the bite to Sarasota County Sheriff’s Office 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, 62 people were potentially exposed to rabies and received rabies post-exposure prophylaxis through the Florida Department of Health in Sarasota County. This compares with 57 people from 2012-13.

Rabies is caused by a virus that humans and other mammals can contract when saliva from an infected animal comes in contact with mucosal membranes or a fresh wound of a person or another animal. The virus is primarily transmitted to another animal or a person by bites but can also occur through a scratch. Other types of contact, such as contact with blood, urine or animal hide do not constitute rabies exposures.

Rabies is always fatal without proper post-exposure treatment.

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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 Sheriff's Office 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 Sheriff's Office Animal Services at 941-861-9500 for handling. If a domestic or wild animal bites or scratches you, seek care promptly. Wash the wound thoroughly with soap and running water for five to ten minutes. Immediately visit your primary doctor, hospital or county health department for medical attention. The contact number to report an animal bite to the Florida Department of Health in Sarasota County (Health Department) is 941-861-6133.

Additional information is available online:

www.sarasotahealth.org

www.cdc.gov/rabies

www.worldrabiesday.org

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MEDIA NOTES:

DOH-Sarasota Media Contact:

Dianne Shipley, 941-861-2852; cell 941-302-1058; DOHSarasotaNews@FLHealth.gov

DOH-Sarasota website: www.sarasotahealth.org