

Georgetown Animal Inspector

Letter to the Editor/Rabies Article

HOW RABIES COULD AFFECT YOU!

By Holly E. Willard D.V.M

Georgetown Animal Inspector

To The Editor,

Did you know that 55,000 people worldwide die from rabies each year? In fact 1 person dies from rabies every 10 minutes! Rabies in humans is 100% preventable with appropriate care. In the United States human deaths from rabies has declined since the turn of the century from more than 100 deaths per year to 1-2 rabies deaths per year. Rabies is a viral disease of mammals; it infects the central nervous system and ultimately results in death. Pets can act as the bridge between rabid wildlife and people. Pets can be attacked by or fight with rabid animals (raccoons, fox, woodchucks, skunks, bats, and feral cats) exposing themselves and their human owners to this deadly virus. Public health costs associated with disease detection, prevention, and control exceeds \$300 million annually. These costs include rabies laboratory costs, medical and rabies postexposure costs as well as the costs of vaccinating companion animals and animal control programs.

The best way to prevent rabies is by vaccinating pets and livestock, and by avoiding wild animals. All dogs and cats are required by law to be vaccinated against rabies. Unvaccinated pets exposed to wildlife are a public health risk. Since September of 1992, 10 dogs and over 150 cats have actually contracted rabies in Massachusetts, and one third of these cats and almost all the dogs were house pets. All people exposed to these pets had to receive post-exposure prophylactic shots to prevent them from getting rabies. These shots are costly and can have potential side effects but are necessary because if not prevented, rabies is almost always fatal

Rabies is 100% preventable, but also 100% fatal if not prevented or treated! It is the law that all dogs and cats have current rabies vaccinations and as a pet owner you are required to provide a valid rabies certificate as proof. The current guidelines for rabies vaccinations are as follows: The first rabies shot is given at 3-6 months of age (ideally at 3-4 months of age); the second rabies vaccine must be given exactly 9-12 months later to receive a three-year rabies vaccination. In order to have a valid three-year rabies vaccination for your dog or cat you must have proof of two vaccinations exactly 9-12 months apart and your certificate must have a valid date. If your pet has not been vaccinated according to these regulation, or if your pet is one day or more overdue for its rabies booster, your pet is considered unvaccinated. Unvaccinated animals exposed (or potentially

exposed) to any suspect animal will need to be quarantined for six months or put to sleep according to state guidelines.

To avoid exposure, keep your pets up-to-date on their rabies shots, do not place food outside which would attract animals, and don't touch or go near any wild or stray animals. If you encounter a wild animal that is acting strangely, call your local animal control officer by contacting the police department. If you have been bitten, scratched or otherwise exposed to a potentially rabid animal, which includes any wild animal or stray cat or dog, call your doctor right away. The Massachusetts Department of Public Health is available to answer questions about rabies in humans (617-983-6800). The Department of Food and Agriculture's Bureau of Animal Health is available to answer questions about rabies in animals (617-626-1794).

The annual rabies clinic will be held again this spring on Saturday, April 4th, from 1:00-3:00 PM at the Georgetown Highway Department on East Main Street. The Veterinary Association of the North Shore, a non-profit organization, sponsors these clinics. Proceeds go towards Veterinary student scholarships. The cost will be \$10.00 per vaccine (dogs and cats only). One-year certificates will be given unless you bring proof of vaccinations done according to the state law. Please bring any and all rabies certificates you possess to the clinic so we can determine if your pet can receive a three-year certificate. Remember that it is the law that all dogs and cats have proof of current rabies certificates, so **VACCINATE BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE.**

Sincerely,
Holly Willard DVM
64 Jackman Street, Georgetown
978-352-6090



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