

Animal Encounters: What You Need to Know

Maybe you're on a hike with your dog in the woods, or playing in the backyard with the children, when a wild or stray animal approaches. Sure, they're cute, and who hasn't seen the videos online of someone "rescuing" a raccoon or being chosen by the "cat distribution system"? Unfortunately, that adorable animal may be infected with rabies or other dangerous diseases.

How do you protect yourself, your family, and your pets? Here is what you need to know:

If you have been bitten, scratched, or exposed to saliva:

- Do not panic...but do not ignore it either. Wash the wound thoroughly with soap and plenty of water.
- It is critically important that you seek medical advice immediately, particularly if you believe you have been exposed to rabies.
- If it is a wild animal, do not try to pick it up. Try to safely capture or restrain it without further risk of exposure. Be sure to wear heavy duty, thick gloves. The animal will need to be humanely euthanized before it is submitted for testing. For accurate test results, care must be taken to not damage the animal's head.
- If it is a domestic animal (cat, dog), be sure to get the owner's information.
- If the animal is a stray cat or dog, take note of any identifiable coloring or markings before it runs away, or try to safely capture or restrain it without further risk of exposure. Depending on the circumstances, it may be possible to quarantine the animal for observation.
- Report the bite to the Monroe County Health Department.

If your pet has had physical contact with a wild animal:

- Wear gloves to examine or wash your pet.
- If you must kill the attacking animal to stop the attack on your pet, be careful not to damage its head, as the brain will need to be tested for rabies. You will need to take the animal to a veterinarian for the head/brain to be removed and shipped to the state lab for testing. The health department can assist with coordinating arrangements if necessary.
- Contact your veterinarian to check the status of your animal's rabies vaccine.

If your pet has bitten someone:

- Tell the person bitten to seek medical attention immediately.
- Do not let your pet roam freely and do not give your pet away. It must be available for quarantine and observation.
- Do not kill your pet or allow it to be killed unless you have been instructed to do so by public health authorities. If your pet dies during the observation period, notify the health department immediately.
- Check with your veterinarian to find out if your pet's rabies vaccination is up-to-date.

What you can do to help control rabies:

- Be a responsible pet owner and protect your pets by keeping their vaccinations up-to-date; it is the law.
- Pets should not be allowed to roam. Limit the possibility of exposure by keeping your animals on your property or on a leash.
- Do not leave garbage or pet food outside as it may attract wild or stray animals.
- If your pet is attacked or bitten by a wild animal, report it.
- Wild animals should not be kept as pets. Enjoy all wild animals from a safe distance, even if they seem friendly.
- If you see a wild animal acting strangely, report it. Do not go near it yourself.

Special note about bats:

- A bat that is active by day, is found in a place where bats are not usually seen (for example, in a room in your home or on the lawn) or is unable to fly is far more likely than others to be rabid. Such bats are often easily approached.
- If you are bitten or scratched by a bat or if infectious material (saliva) from a bat contacts your eyes, nose, mouth or a fresh wound, wash the affected area thoroughly and get medical advice immediately.
- The bat should be captured without further risk of human exposure and submitted for rabies testing.
- People usually know when they have been bitten or scratched by a bat. However, since bats have small teeth which may leave marks that are not easily seen, there are situations in which medical advice should be sought even in the absence of an obvious wound. Examples may include awakening and finding a bat in your room, seeing a bat in the room with an unattended child or seeing a bat near a mentally impaired or intoxicated person.
- People cannot get rabies just from seeing a bat in an attic, in a cave or at a distance. In addition, persons cannot get rabies from having contact with bat guano (feces), blood or urine or from touching a bat on its fur.

Facts about rabies:

- Rabies is a fatal but preventable viral disease that infects the central nervous system. The virus is found in the saliva and brain tissue of infected mammals. It is transmitted primarily through bites, but can also spread if infected fluids enter open wounds, eyes, the nose, or the mouth.
- In the U.S., rabies is most commonly found in bats, raccoons, skunks, and foxes. If a person does not receive appropriate medical care quickly after an exposure, the virus attacks the brain, ultimately resulting in death.

For more information please contact the Monroe County Health Department at 304-772-3064.



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