

Protect Yourself against Animal Bites

July 1, 2008

During the summer months many people spend time outdoors, which may lead to opportunities for interaction with animals. Before handling an animal, think twice, and avoid getting bit. Not only do bites hurt, but they may expose a person to the rabies virus.

All mammals, including humans, are susceptible to rabies. This deadly viral disease is maintained in Texas in wild animal reservoir species like skunks, bats, raccoons, coyotes and foxes. People can become infected with the rabies virus through a bite by an infected animal, because the rabies virus is transmitted through saliva.

To avoid potential rabies exposure, The Waco-McLennan County Public Health District recommends the following:

- Vaccinate your family pets against rabies regularly.
- Never approach or have direct contact with unfamiliar or wild animals.
- Avoid direct contact with stray cats and dogs. These animals probably have not been vaccinated against rabies and are not used to being handled by people.
- Do not lift or hold an injured animal, because their pain may prompt them to bite.
- Never adopt wild animals or bring them into your home.
- Do not try to nurse sick animals to health. Call an animal control officer or a wildlife rehabilitator if you find a sick animal.
- Make sure that your trashcans and pet food containers are secured, so they do not attract animals.

If you are bitten by an animal:

- Wash the wound thoroughly with soap and water for at least five minutes. This activity removes a lot of contaminants from the bite wound.
- Report the bite as soon as possible to your local animal control agency or law enforcement agency. If the animal is an owned pet (dog, cat, or ferret), the animal control agency will oversee its 10-day rabies observation period. Most owned animals are not rabid, and the 10-day observation period passes uneventfully, resulting in rabies being ruled out. If rabies is confirmed, the bite victim will start the rabies vaccination series.
- Bites from bats, skunks, foxes, raccoons, or coyotes are considered high-risk exposures. State law requires the animal to be euthanized and tested for rabies immediately. In most cases, treatment can be delayed until the test results are received.
- Bites from bats may be harder to detect than bites from larger mammals. Direct contact with a bat, in which a bite cannot be ruled out, warrants evaluation by a physician and rabies testing of the bat.
- Contact a doctor as soon as possible for initial evaluation of the wound.

For more information on this topic, please contact the Waco-McLennan County Public Health District at 254-750-5411 or the Department of State Health Services website at <http://www.dshs.state.tx.us/idcu/disease/rabies> .

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