

Feral Cats and Effective Rabies Control

Rabies is an acute viral infection of the central nervous system. Of all the zoonotic diseases, it is one of the most feared and misunderstood even though its threat to humans is very small in the U.S. The virus causes acute encephalitis and is invariably a fatal disease. Media accounts tend to sensationalize and reinforce popular misconceptions about rabies. Much unnecessary anxiety and fear could be avoided by understanding that rabies in the U.S. is primarily a disease of wildlife, that the disease can be controlled, and that the threat to humans and companion animals can be minimized. In Asia and Africa, animal rabies is found primarily in dogs. The disease usually infects humans through a bite from a rabid animal.

For the past 40 years rabies has been reported more frequently in wildlife than in domestic animals. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), 49 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico reported 6417 cases of rabies in animals in 2005. One human contracted rabies. In the U.S., 92% of rabies is found in wildlife.

Wildlife managers, public health & animal agencies face important decisions on how to control this disease. All too often, feral cats are caught in the middle of ill-conceived efforts to protect humans by exterminating healthy feral and stray animals. Efforts to eliminate rabies by killing animals are cruel, ineffective, costly, and difficult to implement. Nonlethal control has proven to be more effective over the long term.

Research has shown that population eradication often causes wildlife populations to expand rather than decline, as the remaining animals will quickly breed to the previous numbers. Others will enter from different areas, and these may not have the immunity of local populations. Scientific evidence confirms the long-term viability of nonlethal population and disease control through sterilization, birth control, and oral vaccines for wildlife.

What To Do If You Are Bitten by a stray/feral cat

All animal bites should be immediately flushed and cleansed with soap and water. Wash the wound for five minutes. Unfortunately, bites from bats are difficult to detect. Rabies is treatable through effective post-exposure treatment that must be started before symptoms appear.

First and most important - use the correct equipment - do not pick up feral kittens until you have tamed them. If you get bitten, keep the cat confined for 2 weeks.

Rabies quarantine is essential and rabid cats usually die within 4 to 6 days. Make sure your tetanus vaccination is current. This vaccination lasts for ten years, but each time you are bitten, its potency is depleted.

If you are trapping ferals, you should have the preexposure rabies shots. These are available from your local Department of Public Health. The series of 3 injections usually costs \$150 each

If an unknown animal has bitten you and the animal cannot be quarantined, you will need post-exposure shots. You will need: one dose of immune globulin, then 5 doses of rabies vaccine over a 28 day period (days 0,3,7,14,28) after the first vaccination. The shots in the arm are almost painless - the shots previously administered in the stomach are no longer given!

Rabies in U.S. Border Countries

In 2005 Canada reported 248 cases of rabies in animals, a 5% decrease from 261 in 2004.. Rabies in skunks decreased during 2005, though rabies increased in bats by 13.3% (83 cases in 2004 & 94 in 2005) Canada reported no cases in humans.

Mexico reported 387 cases of rabies in animals, an inc. of 46.6% from 2004. Dogs accounted for 26% of rabies cases. Mexico confirmed 8 cases of rabies in humans: 5 from dogs, 2 from foxes and a in a bat. This is a decrease from 1997 when 23 people contracted rabies in Mexico.

Lethal Solutions Vs. Nonlethal Solutions

In Western Europe, the very successful oral vaccine (vaccinia-glycoprotein—V-RG) developed in the U.S., has proven to be an effective, economical, and humane control. Wildlife vaccination via food bait has blocked the spread of the disease and prevented small outbreaks from becoming major epidemics by maintaining healthy populations of key vector species as immune barriers. Vaccines placed in baits ensure very high immunization rates. Field tests on over 40 species of animals have demonstrated the vaccine's safety.

Scientific experts stated long ago that killing populations to control rabies might actually aggravate the spread of the disease. Unfortunately, many government agencies and conservation groups have taken a long time to grasp this concept, and millions of animals needlessly have lost their lives.

Finally, in 1997, veterinarians and wildlife biologists at the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine stated that vaccination barrier zones could halt the spread of raccoon rabies. Cornell's Dr. Donald Lein called for congressional action to appropriate funds through the government's Animal Damage Control (ADC) unit of the USDA-APHIS, to use for oral vaccination programs.

The V-RG vaccine has been used in several "drops" across parts of the eastern U.S. for raccoons and in Texas for coyotes and gray foxes. Approximately 355,000 doses of the vaccine were distributed over 1,500 square miles in four counties in Ohio in 1998. Since the programs were initiated, a total of 8.6 million doses of the vaccine have been distributed over 140,000 square miles. So far the results have been excellent, with markedly reduced rabies cases reported in the targeted areas.

Solution for the U.S.: Kill the Virus, NOT the Animals

Rabies can be controlled and its threat to human health minimized. Local, state, and federal agencies responsible for wildlife management and public health have been reluctant to adopt nonlethal disease control alternatives in the past. This has resulted in

the spread of rabies, the deaths of countless animals, and a needless risk to human health.

Other states are now using vaccine-laced bait: Ohio, Florida (Pinellas County), Massachusetts (Cape Cod), New Jersey (Cape May), New York (upstate), Vermont, and parts of Texas. The Texas Department of Health originally hoped that the oral vaccine would only contain the rabies virus in animals. They now believe that the vaccine appears to eliminate rabies over large areas.

During 2002 multiple state agencies, the CDC and the USDA, continued to expand an immune barrier from Lake Erie, PA and New York that will eventually reach the Gulf of Mexico in Alabama.

Other Countries

Many countries in Western Europe have eliminated rabies by using the oral vaccine. This has caused the World Health Organization (WHO) to state that rabies can eventually be eradicated worldwide. This is indeed good news for many developing countries. India and parts of Africa still have thousands of people dying from rabies each year. WHO reports that between 35,000 and 60,000 people die annually from rabies. Most of the cases are found in Asia, but Africa has a large number of rabies cases as well. Because it is very difficult to collect data in poorer countries, many rabies deaths go unreported.

Bat Rabies

Rabies acquired from bats has been the main cause of rabies deaths in humans in the U.S. Even then this incidence is very low—just a few each year. During the last century, the number of human deaths in the U.S. attributed to rabies decreased from 100 or more per year to an average of one to two each year.

It has not always been clear how humans acquire rabies from bats. As a precaution, if anyone ever encounters a sick bat, you should call a wildlife rehab. center for advice and do not handle the bat. If a bat dies or bites a human, rabies tests should be done immediately on the bat. If rabies is confirmed, post-exposure treatment should be started right away.

Remember that bats are a vital part of the environment. They are one of the most beneficial creatures on earth. They help to keep diseases down by consuming vast quantities of insects, and for this alone they should be treated with a great deal of respect. The number of rabid bats found is indeed very small.

Feral Cats and Rabies

First, no cat has infected a human with rabies for over 4 decades. Cats are less susceptible to rabies than many other animals. When cats do get rabies, they usually get the “furious” type; they stop eating, become very aggressive, and make unprovoked attacks on other animals and humans. Rabid cats usually die within four to eight days.

Generally the CDC recommends 10-day rabies quarantine for cats. Some health departments, such as the one in Maryland, insist on a six-month quarantine.

Although not natural vectors of rabies, feral cats can become exposed to the virus by attacks from infected wildlife. However, if colonies are destroyed, other cats soon move in to fill the vacated territory. The best means to protect both feral cats and human health is to vaccinate all cats and maintain up-to-date, accurate records.

Even though much is made of the fact that more rabid cats are found in the U.S. now than rabid dogs, still the figures are very low - 300 rabid cats in 1997. Cats are not considered a vector species. There is no "cat" rabies. Rabid cats are reported by states experiencing epizootics of rabies in raccoons, followed by states with rabid skunks and finally by states with rabid foxes.

The History of Rabies in the U.S.

Ellen Perry Berkeley, in her article "The Truth about Rabies" in *I Love Cats* magazine, shares this interesting synopsis of rabies in the United States:

Forty years ago almost 6,000 dogs got rabies every year.

In 1997, 126 dogs were reported rabid

In 1953, there were 538 cases of cat rabies

In 1993 there were 291 cases in cats and in 1998—282

By 1960, more than half the confirmed cases of rabies were found in wildlife

By 1992, more than 90 percent of rabies cases were found in wildlife.

In the 1940s, an average of 40 people died from rabies every year

During the period 1980 to 1998 around 2 to 3 people died each year from rabies.

Licks and other non-bite exposures hardly ever cause the disease in humans.

ALLEY CAT RESCUE ADVOCATES A COMPREHENSIVE NONLETHAL RABIES CONTROL PROGRAM BASED ON THREE PRIMARY INITIATIVES:

1. Implement widespread oral-vaccine immunization barriers for key wildlife vector species, primarily raccoons and skunks.
- 2 Educate the public on steps to minimize human risk from wildlife rabies, including vaccination of outdoor cats and dogs and reporting sick bats to wildlife groups—bats are not to be killed.
3. Recognize and support the vaccination and nonlethal management of feral cat colonies as an effective and important part of a comprehensive control program.

More Rabies Facts

- Since 1990, 38 people have died in the U.S. from rabies. Thirty-one caused by bats.
- The WHO reports that approximately 50,000 to 60,000 humans die from rabies each year worldwide.
- Frequent rabies boosters in cats can cause fibrosarcomas that can be fatal. Therefore annual rabies vaccinations are no longer recommended. A three-year vaccination plan is now advocated.

- After vaccinating domestic cats, it is normal for a lump to appear at the injection site for a few days. However, you should check the vaccination site for lumps a few weeks later, and if one appears at that time, report this to your veterinarian immediately.
- If anyone comes into contact with a sick bat, it is strongly recommended that a quarantine or rabies test be considered for the bat. Only 3 of the 29 cases of people who died from the bat rabies variants showed any bite wounds. This may be because the wound left by a bat is very small. Remember that bats are beneficial to the environment and they keep insects under control.
- Cats with rabies usually die within four to eight days, thus a quarantine period of two weeks, as recommended by the CDC, is usually adequate.

The National Academy of Sciences stated as long ago as 1973 that: "Persistent trapping or poisoning as a means to rabies control should be abolished. There is no evidence that these costly programs reduce either wildlife reservoirs or rabies incidence. The money can be better spent on research, vaccination, compensation to stockmen for losses, education, and warning systems."

Minimize Your Risk

- If you feed feral colonies, remove food sources after dark
- Remove food sources from areas outside your home
- Animal-proof your home and outbuildings
- Vaccinate outdoor companion animals with a three-year vaccination
- Approach unfamiliar animals with caution
- Observe wildlife from a distance
- Educate children on safety precautions

Need for Education

The wildlife rabies epidemic can effectively be controlled and represents a very minor threat to public health. And this minor threat can be further minimized with a few simple precautions, mentioned in this article. According to the CDC, long-term lethal control (sustainable population reduction) has not been successful in North America or elsewhere.

What You Can Do

Contact state and federal agencies responsible for wildlife management and public health, encouraging immediate implementation of comprehensive nonlethal wildlife rabies control programs using the V-RG oral vaccine. These agencies include: state game commissions, local animal control authorities, and federal, state, and local health departments.

- Field programs in Europe and Canada using oral vaccines have had promising results.
- Switzerland was declared rabies-free status in 1998, after using oral vaccinations in wildlife populations.
- France is close to being rabies free.
- Southern Ontario is close to eliminating rabies in red foxes.

- In Texas, the oral vaccine is showing great promise in eliminating rabies in gray foxes and coyotes.

For the first time, through the use of oral immunization, a method for the elimination of rabies is available that is effective, safe, inexpensive, and practical.

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