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Rabies Concerns Rise in Spring

Brewster, NY—Rabies is a deadly disease. When an animal sick with rabies bites a person or another animal, the disease can spread through the animal's saliva. Without treatment a person infected with the rabies virus will usually not survive. When the warm, spring weather arrives, the chance of infection rises because people spend more time outdoors. Wild baby animals are born and often seen. In New York State, more than half of the rabies cases in wild animals are in raccoons, followed by bats, skunks and foxes. So far this year, three raccoons in Putnam County have been tested and found to have the rabies virus. Domesticated animals, such as cats and dogs, can also become sick with rabies. Regular pet vaccination can protect them.

“A person can become infected with the rabies virus through a bite from a sick animal,” says interim Commissioner of Health Michael Nesheiwat, M.D. “Infection can occur when saliva carrying the virus comes in contact with not only an open wound, but also an individual's eyes, nose or mouth. That is why approaching a wild or stray animal, no matter how cute, is a bad idea. An animal does not have to look sick to be infected.”

Every year, well-meaning residents try to help baby animals they think may have been abandoned. Later they become worried that they might get rabies. A better plan is to leave the animal alone, or call a wildlife rehabilitator to see if the animal truly needs assistance. The only way to check for certain if any animal has rabies is to test their brain tissue.

Safety around animals should include teaching children to avoid all wild and stray animals and

telling an adult about any contact with an animal, including an unfamiliar pet. Children and adults alike should resist the urge to touch or pet a wild or stray animal, including new litters of baby animals.

“While wildlife and feral cats account for a number of required rabies treatments, the number-one reason for treatments in Putnam County remains bats,” continues Dr. Nesheiwat. Bats are more likely to get into homes and are more active in spring when they return to the local area.

“If you find a bat in your home, capturing it safely is best,” adds Dr. Nesheiwat. “We can test it for rabies and you can avoid the two-week series of shots if it’s not infected.” To safely capture a bat, watch the popular demo from the New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH), available on the Putnam County website at <http://www.putnamcountyny.com/how-to-capture-a-bat/>.

Other programs to reduce the chance of spreading rabies include the PCDOH pet vaccination clinics and the Feral Cat Task Force. Free vaccination clinics are usually held three times a year—in March, July and November. The next event will be held at Hubbard Lodge in Cold Spring on July 15 from 10 a.m. to 12 noon. The Feral Cat Task Force has captured, neutered, vaccinated and returned 622 cats, and adopted or fostered 128 of them in Putnam County since 2012. For people interested in volunteering or making a donation in support of this program, please contact the Health Department at 845-808-1390 ext. 43160.

All animal bites or contact with wild animals should be reported promptly to the Department of Health at 845-808-1390. After hours or on weekends/holidays report the incident by calling the Environmental Health Hotline at 845-808-1390 and press “3.” A Health Department representative will promptly return your call. The Health Department will test a wild animal for possible rabies after an incident involving human or pet contact. If a family pet encounters a wild animal, avoid immediate handling of your pet, or use rubber gloves and call the Health Department.

The Health Department’s mission is to improve and protect the health of the county’s nearly 100,000 residents through prevention of illness and injury. Core services include community health assessment, disease surveillance and control, emergency preparedness, environmental health protection, family health promotion and health education. For more information, please visit our website at www.putnamcountyny.com/health or on Facebook at www.facebook.com/putnamhealth and Twitter @PutnamHealthNY. ###