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Rabies Remains Rare, but Deadly; Health Department Urges Residents to Vaccinate Pets

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Written by Putnam County Department of Health



Rabies is a viral disease that almost always leads to death, unless a vaccine is provided soon after exposure. Springtime is when wild baby animals are born and bats often return to the local area. While rabies is most often seen among wild animals such as raccoons, bats, skunks, and foxes, pets and livestock can also become sick with rabies. Current vaccination can protect pets if they are exposed to rabid animals. The Putnam County Department of Health (PCDOH) hosts three pet vaccination clinics each year in March, July, and November. The next event will be held at Hubbard Lodge in Cold Spring on July 27 from 10 a.m. to 12 noon.

"We have been able to keep the number of human rabies cases extremely low due to the combination of companion animal vaccination programs like the one offered at the PCDOH and human rabies vaccine availability," says

Health Commissioner Michael J. Nesheiwat, M.D. "Remember, it is never a good idea to approach a wild or stray animal. An animal does not have to look sick to be infected and the only way to tell if an animal has rabies is to test their brain tissue," continues Dr. Nesheiwat.

Rather than approaching a baby animal that seems to have been abandoned, residents are urged to leave the animal alone, or call a wildlife rehabilitator to see if the animal truly needs assistance. Children should be taught to avoid all wild and stray animals and to tell an adult if they have come in contact with an unfamiliar animal.

Bats remain the number one reason for rabies treatments. "If you find a bat in your home, it is important to capture it safely and contact the health department for an exposure assessment," urges Dr. Nesheiwat. "A captured bat can be tested for rabies and if it is not infected you can avoid the two-week series of shots." 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/>.

The Feral Cat Task Force is another program that helps to reduce the chance of spreading rabies. The Feral Cat Task Force has captured, neutered, vaccinated and returned 54 cats, and adopted or fostered 17 kittens so far in 2019. 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 PCDOH at 845-808-1390. After hours or on weekends/holidays report the incident by calling the department's environmental health hotline at 845-808-1390 and press "3." A representative will promptly return your call. If a family pet encounters a wild animal, avoid immediate handling of your pet, or use rubber gloves and call the health department. PCDOH personnel will facilitate testing wild animals for possible rabies after an incident involving human or pet contact.

The mission of the Putnam County Department of Health, nationally accredited by the Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB), is to improve and protect the health of the Putnam County community, composed of nearly 100,000 residents. Core services include community health assessment, disease surveillance and control, emergency preparedness, environmental health protection, family health promotion and health education. For

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