

Cut your rabies risk – leave even the cute, cuddly wildlife alone

Each year, the Maryland Departments of Health and Mental Hygiene (DHMH) and of Natural Resources (DNR) learn of situations where residents with the best of intentions have “rescued” a young wild animal and in doing so, have exposed themselves to rabies. Even when animals do not have rabies, residents endanger animals by interfering with their natural adaptation and development of basic survival skills.

“Rabies is a serious disease transmitted through the saliva of an infected animal. It is nearly always fatal without the provision of preventive treatment. The best ways to protect your family are to appreciate wildlife from a distance and to vaccinate your pets,” said Dr. Katherine Feldman, State Public Health Veterinarian. “We want to remind residents to report sick, injured or nuisance wildlife by calling toll-free in Maryland: 1-877-463-6497.”

All mammals are susceptible to rabies, including wildlife and such domestic species as dogs and cats. In the United States, rabies is predominantly seen in wildlife. Residents are reminded that wild animals that might be perceived as needing help or rehabilitation might in fact be debilitated due to diseases such as rabies.

Likewise, residents should leave alone very young animals that appear to have been abandoned or to be vulnerable. It is important to stay away from wild animals, including young animals and those that appear sick or injured, and to contact DNR at 410-260-8540 or 1-877-463-6497 for assistance; for after-hours wildlife emergencies, call 1-800-628-9944. Maryland law prohibits residents from possessing certain wild animals, including raccoons and foxes, because these and other animals can pose a significant risk to humans. Only licensed wildlife rehabilitators should handle wildlife. See the website below for help finding licensed rehabilitators in your area.

Animals with rabies might act normally during the early stages of the disease, making it difficult to know the animal is infected. As the disease progresses, animals often show changes in behavior. Wild animals might act very docile and domestic animals might become aggressive. Rabid animals might stagger, drool or become paralyzed. The diagnosis of rabies is made by examining brain tissue from the suspected rabid animal.

When a person is bitten by or exposed to the saliva of a rabid animal, onset of the disease is prevented by the provision of a rabies vaccine series administered over a 14-day period and a dose of rabies immunoglobulin given at the beginning of that series. Each year, approximately 900 Marylanders receive preventive treatment after exposure to a rabid or potentially rabid animal.

To prevent exposure to rabies:

- Have your dogs, cats, ferrets, horses, sheep and cattle vaccinated against rabies.
- Keep your pet under your control at all times, especially when traveling.
- View wildlife from a distance and do not feed or attempt to rescue wildlife.
- Avoid sick animals and any that are acting in an unusual manner.
- Cover garbage cans securely and do not leave pet food outside.
- Do not “rescue” or relocate wildlife.
- Prevent bats from entering your home. If you find a bat in your home, do not touch it. Only let it go if you are sure no people or household pets have had any contact with it. Contact your local health department or animal control agency for assistance.
- If you or your pet has been bitten or otherwise exposed to a rabid or suspected rabid domestic animal, get the owner’s name, address and telephone number. Contact your local health department or animal control agency immediately.

Additional information about rabies can be found on the DHMH site at <http://goo.gl/rmD7WA>. For more DNR information about young wildlife, visit <http://goo.gl/3SzSzu>. Additional tips on reporting sick or injured wildlife also can be found at DNR at <http://goo.gl/xhY9tA>.