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*** FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE ***

Wyoming Department of Health officials urge residents to avoid unnecessary contact with wild animals to avoid exposure to rabies

CHEYENNE - Wyoming Department of Health officials today reminded residents that rabies-infected animals are discovered every year in Wyoming and by enjoying wild animals from afar this summer they can reduce possible exposure to the disease.

State Epidemiologist, Dr. Tracy Murphy said skunks and bats are the predominant rabies carriers in the state but other animals such as cats, dogs, horses, cattle, and foxes have also tested positive in the past five years.

"If you see an animal acting in a strange or aggressive manner it's best to leave it alone," Murphy said. "Certainly never bring them into your home, even if they appear friendly."

With bats in particular, seemingly insignificant physical contact has resulted in viral transmission even without a clear history of a bite or scratch. He suggested parents teach children never to handle unfamiliar animals, wild or domestic. "Love your own, leave other animals alone," Murphy said is a good principle for children to learn. He also urged people to keep rabies immunization up-to-date on their domestic animals.

Once symptoms of rabies develops it's almost always fatal and even if the animal cannot be captured to be tested, people may require post-exposure prophylaxis involving a series of injections which are very expensive, he said.

Nationally, the majority of rabies cases reported to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention each year occur in wild animals like raccoons, skunks, bats, and foxes. Domestic animals account for less than 10 percent of the reported rabies cases, with cats, cattle, and dogs most often reported.

Rabies virus infects the central nervous system, causing encephalopathy and ultimately death. Early symptoms of rabies in humans are nonspecific, and may consist of fever, headache, general malaise, and hypersensitivity or itching at the exposure site, Murphy said. As the disease progresses, neurological symptoms appear and may include insomnia, anxiety, confusion, slight or partial paralysis, excitation, hallucinations, agitation, hypersalivation, difficulty swallowing, and hydrophobia (fear of water). Death usually occurs within days of the onset of symptoms.

Although there is no confirmed case of human rabies on record at the Wyoming Department of Health, Murphy said that once or twice a week during the warm weather season agency officials consult with local healthcare providers on cases of people who may need the post-exposure prophylaxis following exposure to potentially diseased animals.

Murphy urged people to see their healthcare provider immediately after physical contact with an animal suspected to have rabies and encouraged health care facilities and providers to develop plans that will provide for timely acquisition and administration of rabies post-exposure prophylaxis for humans.

The number of rabies-related human deaths in the United States has declined from more than 100 annually at the turn of the century to one or two per year in the 1990's. Modern day prophylaxis has proven nearly 100 percent successful. In the United States, human fatalities associated with rabies occur

in people who fail to seek medical assistance, usually because they were unaware of their exposure.

If people find an animal they think may have rabies they should contact their local animal control officials or public health office as soon as possible.

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Rabies Fact Sheet

What is rabies?

Rabies is a disease caused by the rabies virus. It may take several weeks or even a few years for people to show symptoms after getting infected with rabies, but usually people start to show signs of the disease 1 to 3 months after the virus infects them. The early signs of rabies can be fever or headache, but this changes quickly to nervous system signs, such as confusion, sleepiness, or agitation. Once someone with rabies infection starts having these symptoms, that person usually does not survive. This is why it is very important to talk to your doctor or health care provider right away if any animal bites you, especially a wild animal.

Can animals transmit rabies to me?

Yes, many kinds of animal can pass rabies to people. Wild animals are much more likely to carry rabies, especially raccoons, skunks, bats, foxes, and coyotes. However, dogs, cats, cattle, or any warm-blooded animal can pass rabies to people. People usually get rabies from the bite of an infected animal. Many animals, such as dogs, cats, and horses are vaccinated against rabies, but you should always wash any bite thoroughly and check with your healthcare provider about what to do if any animal bites you.

What are the possible signs of rabies-infected animals?

- Wild animals approaching humans.
- Stumbling.
- Nocturnal animals out during the day.
- Animals demonstrating no fear of their natural enemies.
- Or, any change in normal behavior such as a quiet animal becoming aggressive or an aggressive animal becoming quiet.

How can I protect myself from getting rabies?

Be a responsible owner:

- Keep vaccinations up to date for all dogs, cats, and ferrets. This requirement is important not only to keep your pets from getting rabies, but also to provide a barrier of protection for you, if your animal is bitten by a rabid wild animal.
- Keep your pets under direct supervision so they do not come in contact with wild animals. If your pet is bitten by a wild animal, seek veterinary assistance for the animal immediately.
- Call your local animal control agency to remove any stray animals from your neighborhood. They may be unvaccinated and could be infected by the disease.
- Spay or neuter your pets to help reduce the number of unwanted pets that may not be properly cared for or regularly vaccinated.
- Vaccinate valuable livestock, including horses and cattle.

Avoid direct contact with unfamiliar animals:

- Enjoy wild animals (raccoons, skunks, foxes) from afar. Do not handle, feed, or unintentionally attract wild animals with open garbage cans or litter.
- Never adopt wild animals or bring them into your home. Do not try to nurse sick animals to health. Call animal control or an animal rescue agency for assistance.
- Teach children never to handle unfamiliar animals, wild or domestic, even if they appear friendly. "Love your own, leave other animals alone" is a good principle for children to learn.

- Prevent bats from entering living quarters or occupied spaces in homes, churches, schools, and other similar areas, where they might come in contact with people and pets.
- When traveling abroad, avoid direct contact with wild animals and be especially careful around dogs in developing countries. Rabies is common in developing countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America where dogs are the major reservoir of rabies. Tens of thousands of people die of rabies each year in these countries. Before traveling abroad, consult with a health care provider, travel clinic, or your health department about the risk of exposure to rabies, preexposure prophylaxis, and how you should handle an exposure, should it arise.

People who work in professions with higher risk for rabies exposure (for example, veterinarians, veterinary technicians, animal control officers, etc.) should to talk to their health care providers about receiving pre-exposure prophylaxis for rabies.

What to do after a possible exposure?

If you are exposed to a potentially rabid animal, wash the wound thoroughly with soap and water and seek medical attention immediately. A healthcare provider will care for the wound and will assess the risk for rabies exposure. The following information will help your health care provider assess your risk:

- The geographic location of the incident.
- The type of animal that was involved.
- How the exposure occurred (provoked or unprovoked).
- The vaccination status of animal.
- Whether the animal can be safely captured and tested for rabies.

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