



**NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH  
AND MENTAL HYGIENE**  
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*Commissioner*

## **Rabies among Raccoons in Central Park**

*What New Yorkers Should Know*

With the continuing identification of raccoons with rabies in and around Manhattan's Central Park since December 2009, the Health Department reminds New Yorkers to avoid wild animals and to vaccinate their pets against rabies. Central Park is one of the most frequently visited city parks in the United States, with approximately 25 million visitors annually, and there is some risk of exposure for visitors, dogs, stray or feral cats, and other animals. Given the current situation, the risk of exposure may be greater than usual for visitors, dogs, stray or feral cats, and other animals. The Health Department website is regularly updated to reflect new reports of rabid animals. For more information, please visit [nyc.gov/health/rabies](http://nyc.gov/health/rabies).

In the United States, widespread vaccination of pets has helped make human rabies a rare occurrence. New York City's last reported case was in 1944. But the rabies virus can infect any warm-blooded mammal, domestic or wild. Raccoons are the primary reservoir of terrestrial rabies along the East Coast. Raccoons with rabies have been present in New York City, particularly the Bronx and Staten Island, since 1992. Rabid raccoons can infect people and other animals through bites or scratches. So far this year, 32 raccoons found in Manhattan have tested positive for rabies.

### **What is the Health Department doing?**

Controlling rabies in raccoons will help protect people, wildlife and domestic animals in New York City. The Health Department, the Department of Parks and Recreation and the Central Park Conservancy are working with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to implement a vaccination program in Manhattan against rabies. Vaccinating raccoons against rabies will help protect them from becoming infected and prevent further spread of the virus in the City. This will also help decrease the chance that a person or a pet is bitten by a rabid raccoon.

In February 2010, USDA will begin the vaccination program. The City will not use oral rabies vaccine (ORV) but will implement a trap, vaccinate, release (TVR) program. TVR is more effective for ensuring raccoons are vaccinated. The USDA will set traps in and around Central Park, Morningside Park and Riverside Park. Trapped raccoons will be given a rabies vaccine and an ear tag before being re-released in the same location. The TVR program will occur over a four- to eight-week period. It will be followed by another TVR program in the summer to vaccinate raccoons born in the spring. Traps will be placed in remote parts of the park to keep people and pets from interacting with trapped animals. The cages will display instructions on what to do (and whom to contact) in case of an emergency.

As part of its response, the Health Department continues to conduct rabies tests on raccoons that are sick, injured or dead. In addition, any trapped raccoons with evidence of a bite wound will also be tested. Rabies testing requires euthanasia of the animal.

The Health Department, along with the Central Park Conservancy and the Parks Department, is working to raise people's awareness by distributing signs and flyers in the Central Park and Morningside Park areas. The agency is also providing information to elected officials.

### **What is rabies?**

Rabies is a viral disease that infects the central nervous system. It is usually transmitted through the bite of an infected animal. It can be fatal in humans unless treatment (rabies shots) is administered soon after a bite or other exposure. The vast majority of rabies cases in the United States each year occur in wild animals such as raccoons, skunks, bats, and foxes. In New York City and New York State, animal rabies occurs primarily in raccoons, bats and skunks.

### **What are the symptoms of rabies in animals?**

Animals with rabies often exhibit behavior changes. A friendly dog may become withdrawn or belligerent, or an aloof animal may become unusually affectionate or aggressive. A rabid animal may eat or chew things such as wood, soil, stones, plants, or other foreign objects. One of the most recognizable signs is excessive drooling or foaming at the mouth, although this is not seen with all rabid animals. Other signs may include dilated pupils, vacant stare, muscle tremors (especially in cats), hoarseness or a throaty bark or snarl. Rabies can also cause varying degrees of paralysis, affecting the hind legs and the muscles of the head and neck, causing the jaws to hang open.

### **When and for how long is an animal able to spread rabies?**

An animal can only transmit rabies through a bite when the virus has infected the animal's brain. Once the brain is infected, the animal begins to show symptoms and begins to shed the virus in its saliva. The animal remains infectious until its death, which typically occurs within days of the onset of illness.

### **How do people get rabies?**

People usually get rabies from the bite of a rabid animal. It is also possible, but quite rare, for people to get rabies from a scratch or from direct contact with a rabid animal's saliva or nerve tissue if it gets directly into their eyes, nose, mouth, or an open wound. Other contact, such as petting a rabid animal or having contact with the blood, urine or feces (e.g., guano or skunk spray) of a rabid animal, does not constitute an exposure and is not an indication for treatment.

### **Can I get rabies if am bitten or scratched by a raccoon?**

A raccoon that bites a person or pet must be presumed rabid unless a rabies test confirms it is not. If a person or a pet is bitten or scratched, call 311 or 911 so the animal can be collected for testing, and seek medical care immediately. If the raccoon can be tested, you may not need to start rabies treatment unless the test is positive for rabies. If the raccoon tests positive or is not submitted for testing, rabies treatment is indicated as a precaution.

### **What if I am bitten or scratched by a dog, cat or ferret, or by a livestock animal?**

Dogs, cats, ferrets and livestock can get rabies, but it is uncommon in New York City. If a dog, cat, ferret or livestock animal bites a person, it should be watched for the next 10 days. If the animal shows no signs of rabies during that period, the bite victim does not need treatment. The 10-day observation rule applies only to dogs, cats, ferrets and livestock – not to other animals.

### **What if I am bitten or scratched by another type of animal?**

Bites or scratches from bats, skunks, foxes and coyotes are treated like those from raccoons. You should discuss animal bites and scratches from other animals with your doctor or the Health Department to determine whether rabies treatment is needed.

### **What is the preventive treatment for a potential rabies exposure?**

Human rabies treatment, if administered promptly and as recommended, can prevent infection after a person has been bitten or exposed to an animal with rabies. If a doctor determines that rabies exposure may have occurred, the doctor will recommend a series of shots to help the body fight the virus. The shots include rabies immune globulin and four doses of rabies vaccine.

### **How can I protect myself from rabies?**

- Do not touch or feed wild animals, or stray dogs or cats.
- Keep garbage in tightly sealed containers.
- Stay away from any animal that is behaving aggressively or a wild animal that appears ill or is acting unusually friendly. Call 311 or your local police precinct to report the animal.
- If you find a bat indoors that may have had contact with someone, don't release it before calling 311 to determine whether it should be tested. For information on how to safely capture a bat, visit [www.health.state.ny.us/diseases/communicable/zoonoses/rabies/](http://www.health.state.ny.us/diseases/communicable/zoonoses/rabies/)

### **How can I protect my pet from rabies?**

- Make sure your dog or cat is up-to-date on rabies vaccinations.
- Keep your dog leashed while outdoors unless at a specified off-leash area or park.
- Do not leave your pets outdoors unattended.
- Do not try to separate animals that are fighting.
- If your pet has been in contact with an animal that might be rabid, contact your veterinarian, and report the incident to 311.
- Feed pets indoors.

### **What should I do if bitten or scratched by an animal?**

- Immediately wash the wound with lots of soap and water.
- Seek medical care from your health care provider.
- If the biting animal is a stray and can be captured, call 311.

- If the animal is a pet, get the owner's name, address and telephone number to give to the Health Department. This will help the agency determine whether the animal is rabid.
- If the animal is aggressive, call 911.
- Call the Animal Bite Unit (212-676-2483) between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. during the week. You can call 212-POISONS (764-7667) after hours and on weekends. You can also file a report online, at [www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/vet/vetegp.shtml](http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/vet/vetegp.shtml).
- For information about medical follow-up, call 311 or your medical provider.

For more information about rabies in New York City, visit [www.nyc.gov/health/rabies](http://www.nyc.gov/health/rabies).

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