



2021 Veterinary Alert 4: Rabies Updates for New York City

- In calendar year 2021 to date, 13 animals in New York City (NYC) have tested positive for rabies, including 3 cats (2 from Staten Island and 1 from the Bronx) and a raccoon from northern Manhattan
- Veterinarians should ensure that their clients' pets are up to date for rabies vaccination and educate pet owners regarding rabies prevention
- Veterinarians should consider rabies in the differential diagnosis for any patient with a history of exposure to a potentially rabid wild or feral animal, and/or if presenting with progressive neurologic disease
- For current information on rabies and animals testing positive for rabies in NYC, visit nyc.gov/health/rabies

Please share with your colleagues in Veterinary Medicine and your staff

June 15, 2021

Dear Veterinary Colleagues,

To date in 2021, 13 animals have tested positive for rabies, including three cats (7 raccoons and 2 cats from Staten Island, 1 raccoon and 1 cat from Bronx, and 1 raccoon each from Manhattan and Queens). One cat from Staten Island was a 16-year-old outdoor cat that received occasional veterinary care and had been vaccinated multiple times, though was overdue for a rabies vaccine by several years. The cat went missing for many months, appeared ill upon return and was brought to a veterinary hospital. The cat exhibited fractious behavior, was hypersalivating and had signs of neurologic illness including head twitching, light sensitivity and ataxia. Based on the cat's clinical presentation, the veterinarian ordered rabies testing which was positive on 4/23/2021. There were no known exposures to this cat. A second cat from Staten Island was brought to another veterinary hospital by a rescue group where a veterinarian suspected rabies based on its clinical presentation. The cat was aggressive, hypersalivating, had evidence of neurologic illness and bit both a veterinarian and veterinary assistant before being euthanized and submitted for testing. The cat tested positive for rabies on 4/20/21. The third cat, a stray from the Bronx, was trapped by a rescue group and treated at a veterinary hospital on 3/10/21 for a nose laceration and administration of rabies vaccine. The cat's health rapidly declined after he was returned to the rescue group; he became aggressive, lethargic, and displayed signs of neurologic illness. The cat was euthanized and submitted for rabies testing, which was positive on 3/24/21; there were no known exposure to this cat.

The rabid raccoon from Manhattan was found near Inwood Hill Park and tested positive on 3/8/21, despite extensive efforts in 2019 and 2020 to eliminate the virus from Manhattan by vaccinating raccoons. On Tuesday, June 15, the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (Health Department) and the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation (Parks and Recreation) will distribute additional baits containing oral rabies vaccine (ORV) in Manhattan's Inwood Hill and Fort Tryon Parks as part of the ongoing elimination effort. A larger annual citywide ORV effort is being planned for the Fall to vaccinate raccoons in all 5 boroughs.

Throughout the United States, different terrestrial variants of the rabies virus are maintained in their respective vectors, following geographically distinct patterns. The raccoon variant is present in NYC and along the Atlantic Coast and is transmitted most efficiently and commonly from raccoon to raccoon. Occasionally a rabid raccoon may transmit the virus to another animal species (e.g., cats). This is called a spillover event. Historically, most rabid animals in NYC have been identified in the Bronx and Staten Island, with isolated reports of rabid raccoons in Queens and Brooklyn. Exceptions include the large epizootic of raccoon rabies in Central Park from 2009 to 2011 and a smaller epizootic around Inwood Hill and Highbridge parks first identified in 2019.

Several raccoon rabies vaccination efforts have been implemented to control rabies among raccoons in NYC. Vaccination of raccoons in Manhattan in both 2010 and 2019 was done using both ORV and trap, vaccinate and release (TVR). In addition, an annual ORV program conducted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Cornell University, the Health Department, and Parks and Recreation was conducted between 2014 and 2020 as part of a larger effort to eliminate raccoon rabies in 17 states.

Dogs and cats are susceptible to rabies. No rabid dogs have been reported in NYC since 1954, although dogs infected with the raccoon variant have been reported in neighboring areas outside NYC. Since 1992, 26 cats have tested positive for rabies; almost all were strays. Consider rabies for any animal presenting with a progressive neurologic illness, especially in a stray animal, an animal with a bite wound of unknown origin or exposure to a potentially rabid animal, or a dog from a country where the canine rabies variant is present.

Rabies vaccination for dogs and cats

As a reminder, maintaining vaccination against rabies is required of all dogs and cats in NYC. The NYC Health Code requires that all puppies and kittens receive their first rabies shots by 4 months of age. Revaccination is required no later than one year after the primary vaccination, with revaccinations administered at intervals thereafter, in accordance with the recommendations of the manufacturer of a USDA-approved rabies vaccine intended to maintain active immunization. Veterinarians should educate their clients that even indoor dogs and cats are at risk if they escape outside or if a rabid bat enters the home.

Management guidelines for dogs and cats with a known exposure to a rabies vector species or any rabid animal

Upon consultation with the Veterinary Public Health Services' Animal Bite Unit, cases will be assessed on an individual basis and options may include:

- If the animal was never vaccinated against rabies
 - Isolate in veterinary facility for up to 6 months at the owner's expense or euthanize
- If the animal is currently vaccinated against rabies
 - Immediately give booster vaccine
 - Confine and observe in the owner's home for 45 days
- If the animal is not currently vaccinated but previously received rabies vaccine
 - Manage on case by case basis

Management guidelines for healthy dogs and cats that bit a person

- Confine and observe dog or cat for 10 days
 - If animal not currently vaccinated, do not vaccinate until end of 10-day observation period
 - If remains healthy, rabies post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) not indicated for bite victim

- If becomes ill, must be evaluated by veterinarian and the Animal Bite Unit

What All Veterinarians Can Do

- **Educate** clients to:
 - Avoid contact with wild animals and stray animals
 - Make sure their dog or cat is up to date on its rabies vaccinations
 - Avoid leaving their pets outdoors unattended
 - Feed pets indoors and do not leave food outside
 - Avoid trying to separate animals that are fighting
 - Contact their veterinarian if their pet has been in contact with a raccoon, skunk, bat, or any animal that might be rabid
- **Report** animal bites and suspect animal rabies cases to the Health Department’s Veterinary Public Health Services (VPHS):
 - **VPHS Animal Bite Unit (ABU)** during business hours **646-364-1799**
 - **Poison Control Center** outside business hours **212-POISONS (212-764-7667)**
- **Questions?** Contact the NYC Health Department:
 - For questions on rabies exposures in pets, animal bites, and other animal-related issues
 - **Veterinary Public Health Services (VPHS)** **646-364-1783**
 - For questions on rabies exposures in people, PEP, and other human-related rabies issues
 - **Bureau of Communicable Disease** **347-396-2600**
 - **NYC Poison Control Center** outside business hours **212-764-7667**

Additional information about rabies, including NYC summary data and the brochure “Rabies: Protecting Your Pet” is available on the NYC Health Department website at nyc.gov/health/rabies. Call 311 to order copies of the brochure in multiple languages.

As always, we greatly appreciate your partnership and cooperation.

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