



NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF
HEALTH AND MENTAL HYGIENE
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Commissioner

2020 Veterinary Alert #3: Rabies Updates for New York City

- In calendar year 2020, 20 animals in New York City (NYC) have tested positive for rabies including 2 cats: one each from Staten Island and Queens
- For the first time since animal rabies surveillance began in NYC in 1992, at least one rabid raccoon has been reported from every NYC borough
- 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

August 6, 2020

Dear Veterinary Colleagues,

To date in 2020, 20 animals have tested positive for rabies (6 raccoons from Bronx, 9 raccoons and 1 cat from Staten Island, 1 raccoon and 1 cat from Queens, 1 raccoon from Brooklyn, and 1 raccoon from Manhattan). This is the first time since 1992, when animal rabies surveillance began in New York City (NYC), that at least one rabid raccoon has been reported from every NYC borough. It is also the first time a rabid cat has been reported from Queens. The cat, a stray, was found in Astoria and reported by a veterinarian who suspected rabies based on its clinical presentation. The cat was severely aggressive, hypersalivating, and had evidence of neurologic illness beginning with head and body tremors and rapid progression to lateral recumbency and unresponsiveness. The last time a rabid raccoon was reported from Brooklyn was 2014. The rabid raccoon from Manhattan was found near Fort Tryon Park, despite extensive efforts last year to eliminate the virus from Manhattan by vaccinating raccoons.

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 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 oral rabies vaccine (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 NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (NYC Health Department), and the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation was conducted between 2014 and 2020, as part of a larger effort to eliminate raccoon rabies in 17 states. This ORV program in NYC was discontinued due to cuts in the New York State budget. The absence of this vaccination effort has likely led to a growing number of new generations of raccoons that are susceptible to rabies and may be contributing to increased transmission of the virus among raccoons in these boroughs.

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, 20 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 of dogs and cats exposed to a rabies vector species or any rabid animal

Any dog or cat that may have been exposed to a rabid animal should be reported to the NYC Health Department. The NYC Health Department will work with the pet owner and the veterinarian to determine appropriate follow up. Dogs and cats that have never been vaccinated are required to either be euthanized or isolated for a period of up to six months in a facility and manner prescribed by the NYC Health Department under daily veterinary observation. Dogs and cats with a history of rabies vaccination but that are not current and pets with bite wounds of unknown origin should immediately receive a rabies vaccine and will be managed on a case by case basis. Dogs and cats that are currently rabies vaccinated should immediately receive a booster vaccine and be confined and observed for 45 days in the owner's home.

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 and feed them indoors.
- 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 NYC Health Department:

- VPHS Animal Bite Unit (ABU) **646-364-1799**
- Outside business hours, Poison Control Center: **212-POISONS (212-764-7667)**

➤ **Questions?** Contact the NYC Health Department:

- Veterinary Public Health Services (VPHS) **646-364-1783**
For questions on rabies exposures in pets, animal bites, and other animal-related issues
- Bureau of Communicable Disease **347-396-2600**
For questions on rabies exposures in people, PEP, and other human-related rabies issues
- After Hours: NYC Poison Control Center **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 English or Spanish.

As always, we greatly appreciate your partnership and cooperation.

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