For Immediate Release

Third rabies case for Monongalia County in six months; take precautions

MORGANTOWN, WV (Nov. 29, 2018) — A third case of rabies in the National area of Monongalia County in less than six months serves as a reminder to be careful with unfamiliar animals and also provides an opportunity to review what to do if bitten by a rabid animal.

A female living within a three-mile radius of the area where two rabid raccoons were discovered last summer was bitten by a stray cat that she attempted to pet. The cat was taken this past Friday to an area veterinary office, where it proceeded to also bite a veterinary staff member.

The cat was killed and its head was sent to the state laboratory for testing. The test came back on Tuesday as positive for rabies.

“Within our region, it’s unusual to have three cases in a year in a particular locale,” said Dr. Lee B. Smith, county health officer and executive director of Monongalia County Health Department.

“We need to heighten public awareness that rabies is not just found in raccoons, foxes, skunks and bats. It’s not uncommon to be found in dogs and cats. So picking up a kitten with the presumption that they are going to be uninfected and cute can result in an unnecessary exposure.”

Treatment for a rabies bite usually includes a series of four rabies vaccinations over a 21-day period as well as one dose of human rabies immune globulin.

According to Jon W. Welch, program manager of MCHD Environmental Health, the female already had received two rabies vaccines before finding out the results of the cat’s
test. The veterinary staff member, who already had been inoculated against rabies, will follow vaccine booster protocol.

The incident is the third one involving a rabid animal since early June, when a raccoon later found to be rabid fought with a stray cat that was being cared for by a resident. The cat was later put down. Then, in mid-July, a rabid raccoon wandered onto a front porch and encountered a homeowner’s dogs, which had been vaccinated for rabies. The dogs had to be monitored for 45 days.

“The lesson here is that it’s not only the law to get your pets vaccinated against rabies, but also common sense,” Dr. Smith said. “It can save their lives and help prevent the further spread of rabies.”

Rabies is a viral disease found in mammals that attacks the nervous system. If it is not treated soon after exposure, it causes disease in the brain and ultimately death, according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (cdc.gov). The most common wild animals that get rabies include raccoons, skunks, foxes, bats and coyotes. Rabies is transmitted via saliva through a scratch or bite.

If bitten by an animal, the first step is to thoroughly wash the wound with soap and water, Dr. Smith said.

“The second thing is going to see an emergency physician,” he added. “A doctor’s office or a doc-in-the-box are not typically equipped to provide rabies immune globulin and rabies vaccines.”

Early symptoms of rabies in people are similar to other illnesses, such as fever, headache and general weakness and discomfort. As the disease progresses, more specific symptoms include insomnia, anxiety, confusion, slight or partial paralysis, excitation, hallucinations, agitation, an increase in saliva, difficulty swallowing and fear of water. Death usually occurs within days of the onset of these symptoms.

MCHD urges everyone to avoid animals they do not know, including raccoons and bats. These are wild animals that can carry rabies. Area residents also can take precautions to help keep raccoons and other pests out of their home and away from their property. These steps include sealing garbage cans tightly, making sure your home doesn’t have openings that would allow wild animals in and not leaving your pets’ food outside.

If an animal is suspected of having rabies, MCHD Environmental Health should be notified by calling 304-598-5131. When help is needed with potentially rabid wildlife, a list of numbers and wildlife procedures depending on the circumstance can be found at monscheriff.com/wildlife.html.
For additional information about rabies, visit MCHD’s website, monchd.org, or contact MCHD’s Environmental Health program at 304-598-5131.

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