For Immediate Release

Rabid kitten bites veterinary employees; rabies vaccine urged for pets

MORGANTOWN, WV (Dec. 31, 2019) — A kitten found downtown last week off of Willey Street that was taken to a veterinary clinic bit some employees and was later found to have rabies.

The employees are undergoing post-exposure rabies prophylaxis treatment, according to a registered sanitarian from Monongalia County Health Department’s Environmental Health program.

The kitten was sent to the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources Office of Laboratory Services last Thursday by MCHD Environmental Health; results came back Friday that the cat was positive for rabies.

“Rabies is spread through saliva,” said Dr. Lee B. Smith, Monongalia County Health Department executive director and county health officer. “If anyone has been bitten or scratched by an animal, they need to seek medical attention.”

Additionally, “Our view has been consistent with that in order to cut down on the steps, do it without making two or three appointments and go straight to a hospital emergency department.”

Only emergency departments, which, in Monongalia County, would be Ruby Memorial Hospital and Mon Health Medical Center, would have rabies immunoglobulin and rabies vaccine on hand, Dr. Smith noted.

“The health department doesn’t routinely stock rabies vaccine unless we have ordered it for a patient who needs it if they are traveling to a place with rabies, if we are updating local veterinarian staff, or for some other reason.”
Also, all cats, dogs and ferrets should be up to date on rabies vaccines, as per West Virginia state law. “It is not a suggestion,” Dr. Smith said. “It’s the law.”

Another precaution that residents should take is to not leave pet food outside. “It does attract strays and raccoons, and we know we have a rabies issue,” Dr. Smith said.

Monongalia County experienced higher-than-normal instances of reported rabid animals in 2019 than in recent years, with 20 known cases of rabies.

“We investigated 222 animal exposures in 2019,” said Jon Welch, program manager of MCHD Environmental Health. “Of those, 42 required testing and eight tested positive for rabies.”

Five of the animals were raccoons and three were stray cats. The raccoons interacted with family dogs that then interacted with their owners. In those instances, the dogs had to be revaccinated for rabies and then monitored, and any people the dogs interacted with also underwent treatment.

Additionally, the United States Department of Agriculture Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (USDA APHIS), which conducts rabies surveillance, reported another 12 cases of rabies in Monongalia County, without human exposure.

The first reported case this year was in mid-February, illustrating that rabies is not just a warm-weather problem but one that can be found year-round.

MCHD urges everyone to avoid animals they do not know, including raccoons and bats as well as cats and dogs. Rabies is a viral disease found in mammals that attacks the nervous system, ultimately causing disease in the brain and death, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (cdc.gov). The closer to the head a person is attacked, the faster rabies can develop.

In addition to seeking medical treatment, someone who has an encounter with a strange and potentially rabid animal should wash out the wound with soap and water.

In September, MCHD Environmental Health sanitarians distributed Oral Rabies Vaccine (ORV) baits throughout Morgantown. Monongalia County Health Department spent $1,566 to buy 1,080 ORV baits for the drop, Welch said.

This rabies bait distribution took place right after USDA APHIS completed a drop of 49,000 ORV baits in less sparsely populated areas of Monongalia County after MCHD officials asked the agency to move the west-moving zone east again because of the high incidence of reported rabies.
Under West Virginia law, all animal bites are to be reported. MCHD Environmental Health works to control rabies and other vector-borne diseases. MCHD also educates the community on the presence of rabies, the need to avoid wildlife and to take common-sense precautions with pets.

Skunks, foxes and bats, along with raccoons, are common rabies carriers in West Virginia.

More information on rabies can be found at cdc.gov/rabies/.

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