



## **MEDIA RELEASE**

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### **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

## **RABIES CONTROL AND PUBLIC HEALTH**

**Dalton (GA) October 26, 2007** ~ In light of recently reported cases of rabies in North Georgia, the North Georgia Health District's Department of Environmental Health wishes to take this time to clarify that the primary responsibility for control of rabies in Georgia rests with county boards of health. Georgia laws empower and require each county board of health to adopt and promulgate rules and regulations for the prevention and control of rabies. Environmental health officials with county health departments carry out these duties and responsibilities, and they are supported by the Georgia Division of Public Health's personnel and laboratory facilities.

It is required that animal bites be reported in Georgia. When a person is bitten by a dog, cat, raccoon or other mammal then your public health environmentalist usually investigates and assesses the risk for rabies exposure. The protocol for rabies control is the Georgia Rabies Control Manual that can be located online by scrolling down to the manual at <http://health.state.ga.us/publications/manuals.asp>. Healthy dogs, cats and domesticated ferrets that bite humans must be quarantined and observed for a period of ten days; these are the only animals to which the 10-day quarantine period applies. Management of other mammals that have bitten humans depends on the species, the circumstances of the bite, the presence of rabies in the area, and the biting animal's history, current health, and previous exposure to rabies. For example, if a person is bitten by a raccoon or other wild carnivore then it is sacrificed immediately and shipped to the State Public Health Laboratory. However, some wild mammals carry so little risk of rabies that laboratory examination is normally not required following a bite; rodents, opossums and rabbits pose little, if any, risk of rabies exposure to humans and have never transmitted rabies to humans (CDC, 2003). In contrast, bats carry a very high risk and even finding a bat in your bedroom in the morning is considered reason enough to initiate anti-rabies treatments. Transmission of rabies from bats can occur from minor, seemingly unimportant or unrecognized bites. Fortunately, rabies is a completely preventable disease if the risk of exposure is recognized and post-exposure treatments are given in time.

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Your public health environmentalist is not a physician or veterinarian but assists in facilitating post-exposure treatments. While the final decision about whether to give these treatments is between the person bitten and his or her physician, many emergency rooms and physicians rarely deal with rabies; therefore, public health environmentalists provide assistance and consultations with public health officials in Atlanta. The role of the public health environmentalist is to offer his or her expertise and training. Post-exposure treatments are expensive and the health department does not provide or pay for them.

A person who simply pets their dog or cat immediately after it was attacked by a rabid animal is at extremely little or no risk for rabies infection. The rabies virus is not able to penetrate unbroken skin and does not survive on the coat of the dog or cat. Secondary transfer and infection by the rabies virus in this manner has never happened. Persons who elect to receive post-exposure treatments under these circumstances generally do so for their peace of mind. A person exposed to blood, urine, or feces of a rabid animal is at no risk for infection; rabies can only be transmitted via direct contact with saliva or central nervous system tissue.

It is also the responsibility of your public health environmentalist to investigate exposure of domestic animals to rabies. If your dog or cat is bitten by a rabid raccoon, then the vaccination status of your pet is critical. If your pet has been properly vaccinated, then a booster immunization is given by your veterinarian and the animal is observed for the next 45 days. However, if your pet is not vaccinated or vaccination is far out of date, then the public health environmentalist's first recommendation would be to have it euthanized. The only other option is to quarantine the pet for six months under the direct care of a veterinarian or within a double-pen enclosure approved by the environmentalist. Other kinds of domestic animals exposed to rabies have to be assessed individually. Livestock can be vaccinated against rabies but it is not required by regulation.

Obviously many other people and facilities are involved in the broader control of rabies such as veterinarians, physicians, animal control departments and animal welfare agencies. Your public health environmentalist interacts with and needs all of these community partners to promote control of rabies including rabies vaccination clinics when needed. As for the public, avoiding contact with wild carnivore species and vaccinating domestic animals are the most important steps in preventing rabies in humans.

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