



## **Rabies: How to Avoid a Killer Virus**

It probably seems inconceivable to most North Americans, but more than 55,000 people across the world die every year from rabies. This dreaded killer disease still ravages large areas of Asia and Africa and children are often the unfortunate victims. Recently in Massachusetts a man on Cape Cod died from rabies virus encephalitis, which is an inflammation of the brain, after being bitten by a bat. It was the first death due to rabies in Massachusetts in 77 years. Annually 1-2 people die in the U.S from Rabies. Overall, someone in the world dies from rabies every 10 minutes! Fortunately, global awareness is increasing due to World Rabies Day on September 28 2012.

Cats, dogs, raccoons and bats, can carry the Rabies virus most commonly. The first rabid bat was detected in Massachusetts in 1961. The first rabid raccoon was detected in 1992. If an animal is acting disoriented, lethargic, aggressive or uncoordinated there is a chance it has rabies. Rabies can be diagnosed only by examining brain tissue so if a human has been bitten and the animal is not vaccinated against rabies virus it must be euthanized and tested. Over the past two decades over 10,000 bats have been submitted for testing, usually after risk of human exposure or bite, by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. Over the past decade 4.2% of bat submissions tested positive for rabies virus.

How do you avoid getting Rabies? Regular and timely vaccination of your dog and cat will be a great start. Your pet, even if it spends 100% of its time indoors, should be vaccinated against rabies vaccine. Bats are famous for getting indoors in attics and flying around people's homes. Dogs love chasing and catching sick raccoons, bats, opossums and other animals. They love to eat dead animals and can pick up rabies just from contacting the dead animal's saliva. Cats love to chase around quick moving fluttering animals so bats are a big draw for them. If your pet is exposed i.e. it has been bitten or has consumed part of a potentially rabid animal and it is not vaccinated it should be euthanized and tested to prevent human exposure. If your pet bites a person and your pet is not vaccinated against rabies virus it will have to be quarantined for 10 days and euthanized and tested for Rabies if it exhibits any signs of Rabies.

If you are travelling in a foreign country do not pat the dogs. You have no idea if they are carrying rabies. We had a pre-vet student working with us who went to Africa to study baboons. She did not undergo rabies vaccination before traveling due to a vaccine shortage. She made the mistake of patting a friendly dog. It was later diagnosed with rabies. She underwent post exposure prophylaxis rabies treatment, which is a series of vaccinations and is doing quite well at veterinary school now.

You may have your pets vaccinated year round at your local veterinarian's office. Most veterinarians will do a physical examination to make sure your pet is not ill before administering the vaccine. A vaccine administered to a sick pet may not be effective in

protecting your pet from the virus and would be a waste of your hard earned dollars and a danger to you.