

Increase in Oregon Animal Rabies Cases Prompts Prevention Advice

by Bend Weekly News Sources

The number of bats testing positive for rabies in Oregon has more than doubled over all of last year, prompting public health officials to remind people to protect themselves and their pets.

As of Wednesday, October 11, 21 bats and two foxes had tested positive for rabies, compared with nine bats in 2005 and seven bats in 2004.

The state public health laboratory tests bats for rabies when a human exposure to a bat or animal has taken place.

"People can do two things to protect themselves and their pets from rabies," said Emilio DeBess, D.V.M., public health veterinarian in the Oregon Department of Human Services. "Never handle bats. And make sure your cats and dogs are up to date on their rabies vaccines."

Rabies is an infectious viral disease that affects the nervous system and is caused by exposure to a rabid animal. Exposure is usually through a bite but can also occur through scratches and saliva contact with broken skin. It is almost always fatal once symptoms begin.

Bats play an important role in the ecosystem, especially in controlling insects and aiding agriculture, DeBess said, but a small percentage can carry rabies.

"Bats suffering from rabies will normally bite in self-defense," said DeBess. "However, they pose little danger to people who do not handle them. If you find a bat during daylight hours, it is most likely unhealthy and should be avoided."

DeBess also advised that vaccinating pets against rabies protects them and provides a buffer zone between humans and rabid wild animals. "Sadly, if an unvaccinated pet is exposed to rabies, the recommendation is that it be euthanized," he said.

Nationally, twice as many cats as dogs are reported to have rabies each year, underscoring the need for better vaccination coverage among cats, according to DeBess.

Although human rabies is rare in the United States, numbering two to six cases a year, animal bites are very common. As a result, thousands of people annually receive rabies post-exposure prophylaxis, or PEP, underscoring the importance of education and prevention, DeBess said.

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