



Colorado Department
of Public Health
and Environment

*“To protect and improve
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of the people of Colorado.”*

NEWS

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Rabies Confirmed in Skunks, Foxes, Horses and Cat

DENVER—So far in 2010, the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment Laboratory and Colorado State University Diagnostic Laboratory have confirmed rabies in 99 animals. According to state health officials, 34 skunks, 54 bats, seven foxes, one domestic cat, one horse, one mule deer and one muskrat have tested positive for rabies this year.

In 2009, 103 animals tested positive for rabies in Colorado, which broke the state’s annual record of 70 cases in 2006, all of which were bats. Colorado is on track to break another record for rabies in wildlife due the spread of rabies in skunks from eastern Colorado toward the Front Range.

“This is a good time to remind people to keep their pets’ rabies vaccinations up to date and take a few simple precautions to avoid pets coming in contact with wildlife,” said Elisabeth Lawaczek, state health veterinarian at the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. “Having pets vaccinated is the simplest and most effective way to protect pets and family members from this deadly disease. I encourage pet owners to contact their veterinarian and get their pets up to date on vaccinations.”

Rabies is a virus that affects the nervous system of humans and other mammals, resulting in a fatal disease. The virus is shed in the saliva of infected animals. People and animals get rabies from the bite of a rabid animal or direct contact with saliva from such an animal.

Lawaczek said, “We have a cooperative surveillance project with local health departments, animal control agencies, the Colorado Department of Agriculture, the Colorado Division of

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Wildlife, and Colorado State University to track the spread of the disease. Skunks are highly efficient at transmitting rabies to other animals, much more so than bats.”

State public health and wildlife experts don't know why skunk rabies is spreading so quickly in Colorado. Although skunks typically travel only within a half-mile radius, officials suspect that people might be trapping and relocating skunks, which is illegal according to Division of Wildlife regulations.

Signs of rabies in animals include abnormal behavior such as nocturnal animals being active in the day, wild animals approaching humans or other animals, difficulty walking or moving, and unusual animal sounds such as excessive bellowing in cows or hissing/chirping in bats. Some animals with rabies will be very aggressive (furious rabies) while others may appear almost catatonic (dumb rabies).

Skunks and other wildlife should not be handled or fed. If a wild animal allows a person to approach and handle it, the animal probably is ill or injured and will bite in self-defense. A healthy animal usually will remain well-hidden and avoid human contact. You should immediately report any suspected rabid wild animal, such as a skunk, bat, fox or raccoon, to animal control authorities or, if the animal is sick or injured, a local Division of Wildlife office.

Take the following precautions to prevent possible exposure to rabies:

- Do not feed wild animals. This just brings them closer to your family and reduces their natural fear of humans.
- If you encounter a skunk, raccoon or other carnivore during daytime hours, leave it alone. If the animal appears sick or aggressive, call your local animal control agency or the Division of Wildlife.
- Teach children to stay away from wild or dead animals.
- Do not allow pets to roam freely, as this increases the chance they may be exposed without your knowledge.
- Keep your pet's rabies vaccination current, and maintain vaccination records. If you can't afford to vaccinate your pet for rabies through your local veterinarian, check with local animal shelters or humane societies for reduced vaccination fees. Rabies vaccination performed by owners will not be recognized by local public health or animal control agencies for licensing or in the event of an exposure to a rabid animal.
- Discuss rabies vaccination of your livestock with your veterinarian. Vaccination should be considered for horses and other equines, breeding livestock, dairy cattle or other high-value livestock, especially in areas of the state where skunks have been diagnosed with rabies.
- Contact your veterinarian if your dog or cat is bitten or scratched by a wild animal, such as a skunk, bat, fox or raccoon, or comes home smelling like a skunk.
- If a family member or pet has been bitten or scratched by a wild mammal, contact your local public health agency and consult with a physician without delay.

If you have questions about rabies or about whom to call in your area for response to a wild or suspect animal, please call COHELP at 1-877-462-2911 for more information.