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Rabies Vaccinations Save Lives

Virginia Department of Health Urges Rabies Vaccination for Pets

(Richmond, Va.) Ask anyone whose pet has had a run-in with a rabid animal, and they will tell you how important it is to keep pets' rabies vaccines up to date. This year during Rabies Awareness Week, September 24-30, the Virginia Department of Health (VDH) and the Virginia Veterinary Medical Association (VVMA) are stressing the importance of safeguarding the lives of pets and family members by vaccinating pets against rabies.

“An encounter with a potentially rabid animal could be fatal for your pet--particularly if your pet is not currently vaccinated--and puts your family in danger of also being exposed to rabies,” said Virginia’s State Public Health Veterinarian Julia Murphy, DVM. “The loss of a pet is heart breaking, so it is extremely important to make sure your companion animals, such as dogs and cats, are currently vaccinated against rabies,” said Murphy. “Most importantly, protecting your pets in this way also protects you and your family.”

Last year in Virginia 618 cases of rabies in animals were reported. The total number of rabies cases confirmed so far this year in the Commonwealth is 389. Usually between 500 and 600 animals are diagnosed with rabies in Virginia annually.

Rabies is fatal in humans. “Any animal bite should be taken seriously,” said State Epidemiologist David Trump MD, MPH. “The rabies virus is shed in the saliva of animals that are infected with the virus. If an animal bites you, wash the wound and call your physician, local health department or animal control agency immediately.” If your pet has contact with a wild animal, contact your veterinarian or local health department right away.

State law requires all dogs and cats over the age of four months to be vaccinated against rabies. “Vaccines can be given as early as three months and it is possible to vaccinate kittens at eight weeks,” said Don Henry, DVM, VVMA president. “Dog licenses are required throughout the state and some communities require licenses for cats. I urge pet owners to check their pets’ records and be diligent in keeping vaccinations up to date in order to avoid the grief that comes with a rabies diagnoses.”

During Rabies Awareness Week, some localities may offer low-cost rabies vaccinations. Information about the Rabies Awareness Week events in your area is available through your local health department.

The Virginia Department of Health strongly advises the following steps to protect your pets and family from rabies:

- Vaccinate all cats, dogs and ferrets against rabies and keep them up to date
- Avoid contact with wild animals or stray cats and dogs
- Do not feed wild animals or stray cats and dogs

- Report stray cats and dogs to your local animal control agency
- Eliminate outdoor food sources around the home
- Keep pets confined to your property or walk them on a leash
- Call your local Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries office or a licensed wildlife rehabilitator for guidance about sick or injured wildlife

For more information on rabies, log onto the Virginia Department of Health's website at www.vdh.virginia.gov/Epidemiology/DEE/Rabies/ or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's website at www.cdc.gov/rabies/