



NEWS RELEASE

ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

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Alabama observes Rabies Awareness/Dog Bite Prevention Week

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Few diseases bring as much fear and anxiety to a community as rabies. Rabies is a disease of all warm-blooded mammals, including man, and is universally fatal if specialized anti-rabies treatment is not obtained immediately.

To assist in public education about the disease and to encourage the annual vaccination of dogs and cats as required by law, a cooperative effort is being organized by the Alabama Department of Public Health, the Alabama Veterinary Medical Association, and the Alabama Cooperative Extension System.

June 2-8, 2002, has been designated as "Rabies Awareness Week" and "Dog Bite Prevention Week" in Alabama. Public low-cost rabies clinics will be conducted in most counties throughout the state and public service announcements and education programs will be promoted.

Raccoons, bats, foxes and skunks are most often responsible for transmitting the virus to domesticated animals and humans. Immunization of domestic dogs and cats provides the only "buffer" between wildlife and humans.

As summer outdoor activities begin, remember to warn children to not touch, pick up, or feed wild or unfamiliar animals. Avoid sick or strange-acting animals. A wild animal that appears friendly, docile or approaches humans should be avoided. Nocturnal animals, such as raccoons and bats that become active in the daytime, may be suspect. Stray animals pose a continuous public health threat; not only from rabies, but from bite wounds and animal attacks in general.

"If you can touch it, don't," is a good rule of thumb according to state public health veterinarian, Dr. Bill Johnston. There are approximately 9,500 animal bites investigated each year in the state, and 31 out of the last 36 rabid dogs and cats were strays, according to Johnston.

If bitten or scratched by an animal, wash the wound with soapy water for 10 minutes and see a doctor immediately. Do not attempt to catch or kill the animal. Call officials at the animal control center. If your pet is scratched or bitten by another animal, contact your veterinarian.

Dog attacks also are a serious health problem. In health care costs alone, the estimated 650,000 dog bites that require medical attention each year in the nation include 3 percent of all emergency room visits and medical costs are over \$70 million.

Statistics indicate that half of all children are bitten by age 12, and two-thirds of those bitten are under age 20. Two times as many men as women are bitten by dogs and two times as many women as men are bitten by cats. Of the animals involved 84 percent are dogs; 10 percent are cats. Ten percent are strays, 16 percent are the owner's pet; and in 74 percent of bites the owner is unknown. Dog owners are criminally and civilly liable for injuries. Seventy percent of

bites are on the extremities; 11 percent are disfiguring wounds to the face. About a dozen people die each year from dog bites.

Responsible pet ownership can help. These are some tips to prevent dog bites:

- Realize that there is no such thing as a “bad breed” of dog. All dogs can bite if provoked.
- Carefully consider pet selection and consult a veterinarian.
- Socialize your dog so it feels at ease around strangers and other animals. Do not put your dog in a position where it feels threatened and teased.
- Train your dog to respond to basic commands.
- Keep your dog healthy and have it vaccinated against rabies.
- Be alert to signs your dog is uncomfortable or feeling aggressive.
- Have your dog spayed or neutered. Studies show that unsterilized dogs are three times more likely to bite than sterilized dogs.

These are some ways to protect yourself and your family:

- Never leave a baby or small child alone with a dog.
- Be on the lookout for potentially dangerous situations.
- Teach young children to be careful around pets. Children should be taught not to approach strange dogs and to ask permission from a dog’s owner before petting the dog.
- Never disturb a dog that’s caring for puppies, sleeping or eating.
- If a dog approaches to sniff you, stay still. In most cases, the dog will go away when it determines you are not a threat.
- If you are threatened by a dog, remain calm. Don’t scream or run. If you say anything, speak calmly and firmly. Avoid eye contact. Try to stay until the dog leaves, or back away slowly until the dog is out of out of sight. Again, do not turn and run.

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