

RABIES UPDATE

Rabies is a disease that likely everybody has heard about. Rabies is an infectious viral disease that all mammals can contract, including people. In Ontario, bats, foxes, skunks and raccoons are the animals that most often transmit the virus. Once an animal begins to show clinical signs of the disease, it is almost always fatal.

Rabies virus accumulates in the saliva glands of infected animals and is usually transmitted through a bite wound. It is possible however to become infected through cuts and in your skin if you are unaware and handling a rabid animal, dead or alive.

In Ontario, the local Health Units are responsible for determining what kind of pets or livestock need to be vaccinated against rabies. In our area that would be the Ottawa-Carleton Regional Health Unit and the Eastern Ontario Health Unit. There are some jurisdictions in Ontario that require livestock, including cows and horses to be vaccinated, particularly if they are being handled by anyone other than the primary owners. In our part of the province, where there are large tracts of rural land, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry runs a very successful wildlife rabies vaccination program, where oral vaccine is dropped into woodlots and forests to be eaten by foxes, raccoons and skunks. The incidence of rabies, in large part because of these programs is quite low in Eastern Ontario. That being said, confirmed cases of rabies do occur, mainly in those species mentioned above. In 2015, there were 1124 samples submitted to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) for rabies testing in Ontario with 48 positives: 26 bats, 20 raccoons, and 2 cows. As of July 2016 CFIA reports that they received 952 samples for testing with 162 positives: 14 bats, 96 raccoons and 52 skunks, no cows! There is a large increase in the number of raccoon rabies cases.

Several years ago, the Ontario Government made a concerted effort to keep a variant of raccoon rabies out of this province. This type of rabies was being seen in upper New York State and was beginning to cross into Ontario. In recent years, however it appears we are beginning to lose the battle and this new variant of rabies is being confirmed in Ontario.

Livestock that become infected with rabies can exhibit a variety of signs. Cows seem to exhibit either an aggressive behavioural change or a dull, depressed mental state. Cows with the "quiet form" often become weak in the hindquarters and become a downer with paralysis like signs. In both types however, cows tend to have strange vocalizations, balling extensively and making odd noises. In all cases, once signs are present, the animal will die. From time of exposure to showing clinical signs, the timing is approximately 20 days, but can vary depending on where the cow was bitten. Even though the incidence of rabies is low in our part of the province, you should be extremely cautious in handling any animal that is showing neurological signs such as stumbling, strange behaviour, weird vocalizations, unusual aggression or depression, particularly if you have noticed odd behaving foxes, skunks, raccoons or bats around the barn.