



Virginia Animal Control Association
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RABIES AND RABIES TESTING

In the United States human rabies, a disease that is almost 100% fatal, is almost unheard of. According to the CDC, there have been only 34 cases since 2003, and of those, 10 people actually contracted the disease outside of the country. The reasons for this success include widespread vaccination programs for pet animals and the diligent partnership between American health and animal control departments working together to make sure the disease does not cross from wild and domestic mammals to human beings.

Rabies control protocols can be mystifying to those unfamiliar with them. Added to that are the myths still surrounding this disease--- A rabies vaccination offers 100% protection for a pet; you can tell a rabid animal because it foams at the mouth and is afraid of water; rabies can be contracted from birds; a raccoon out during the day is rabid; a person bitten by an animal is safe to wait for symptoms to develop before seeking treatment; rabies "shots" for humans are given in the stomach, and more.

When an owned dog, cat or ferret bites or scratches a human being, regardless of whether it has a current rabies vaccination, it will be placed under quarantine, or observation period. This means the animal will be observed for a 10-14 day period. Observation can take place at the animal's home, at a veterinary hospital, or at a kennel depending on local policy. In some instances, the animal might be confined at the local animal shelter. Even vaccinated pets are quarantined because NO VACCINATION IS 100% EFFECTIVE, and rabies is just too dangerous to take a chance with a human life. The purpose of the quarantine is the recognition that if the animal was shedding the rabies virus at the time of the bite or scratch it will not survive the quarantine period. Animals are released from quarantine by a health department official or animal control officer if the animal appears healthy at the end of the quarantine. Therefore, if for any reason the pet does not survive the quarantine, it will be submitted to a laboratory for rabies testing.

There are some animals for which no safe quarantine period is recognized. These include all wild mammals and hybrid canines, also known as wolf hybrids. If those animals bite or scratch a human, they are destroyed and submitted for testing.

If the animal cannot be found or tests positive for rabies, the usual recommendation to the human victim will be to undergo post exposure rabies prophylaxis. This involves 1-2 injections of rabies immune globulin into the buttocks and into the wound site. This is followed by 4-5 injections of rabies immune vaccine into the deltoid muscle of the arm over a 14-28 day period.

In every state there are laboratories that routinely test animals for the rabies virus. Except for the very

smallest of mammals, such as bats, these laboratories will usually accept ONLY the head of the animal for testing. This means someone, often an animal control officer or health department official, may have to give the heartbreaking news to a pet owner that their beloved pet must have its head removed—something any pet owner might view as a desecration of a beloved family member. Additionally, someone must be tasked with removing the head from the animal, packaging it and submitting it for the test.

In more progressive communities, the decapitation may be done at a local veterinary clinic or hospital. This is preferred because of the extreme risk to an animal control officer or health department official attempting this process in an unsafe environment without proper tools. These risks include injury to the person and possible exposure to rabies. To put this in some kind of context, no police department would think of putting police officers at risk by demanding they actually draw blood from suspected drunk drivers for a blood alcohol test!

Sadly in some localities, the grisly job of decapitating animals for rabies testing still falls to the animal control officer. For those who love animals, which is often the number one reason for becoming an animal control officer, this can be deeply disturbing. Some animal control officers have even reported nightmares after having to perform this gruesome duty. In spite of this, these officers carry out their duty because they recognize rabies is a fatal disease and a human life is at stake.

The Virginia Animal Control Association (VACA) recommends each jurisdiction work with their local health department and veterinary community to formulate the best and safest plan for preparing specimens and rabies testing. Options may include preparation by appropriate personnel at a veterinary hospital, local health department or animal control department, as long as the proper environment and tools are utilized.