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WORLD RABIES DAY GOAL: NO HUMAN DEATHS FROM CANINE RABIES BY 2030

MORGANTOWN, WV (September 25, 2017) — The instance of rabies in the United States has been greatly reduced in past decades through measures such as pet vaccination and wild animal control.

Still, it is wise to continue to be vigilant. In West Virginia, rabies vaccines for your dogs and cats is the law in West Virginia. They must be vaccinated before the age of 6 months with a three-year shot, boosted one year after the initial inoculation, with the regular vaccination repeated every three years.

Getting your pets vaccinated not only keeps them safe, but also your family as well. And rabies vaccines also help achieve the goal of the Global Alliance for Rabies Control (GARC), creators of World Rabies Day, which this year will be celebrated on Thursday, September 28. In a 2015 global conference on rabies elimination, GARC, along with the World Health Organization (WHO), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the World Organisation for Animal Health, created a campaign called Rabies: Zero by 30 that set a goal of having zero human deaths from canine rabies by the year 2030.

Rabies is a serious viral infection of the central nervous system, usually passed to humans through the bite of a rabid animal. Occasionally, rabies can be transmitted if the saliva of an infected animal gets into a fresh scratch, break in the skin or through contact with mucous membranes such as the eyes, mouth or nose.

In West Virginia, most cases of rabies occur in wild animals such as raccoons, bats and skunks, which should be avoided. However, it is not impossible for a dog or cat to have an encounter with a rabid animal that then causes an unvaccinated pet to develop rabies.

If you are bitten or scratched by a rabid or possibly rabid animal, wash the wound thoroughly with soap and warm water and immediately consult a physician and your local health department. In West Virginia, animal bites should be reported to your local health department, such as the Monongalia County Health Department, within 24 hours of the event. If the animal is not available for observation or rabies testing, a series of post-exposure rabies vaccinations may be needed to prevent possible rabies infection. Louis Pasteur developed the
rabies vaccine and first tested it in 1885; World Rabies Day is commemorated on the anniversary of Pasteur’s death.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (cdc.gov), early symptoms of rabies in people are similar to those of many other illnesses, including fever, headache and general weakness or discomfort. As the disease progresses, more specific symptoms appear and may include insomnia, anxiety, confusion, slight or partial paralysis, excitation, hallucinations, agitation, hypersalivation or an increase in saliva, difficulty swallowing and hydrophobia, or a fear of water. Death usually occurs within days of the onset of these symptoms.

In addition to having pets vaccinated, there are other ways to avoid rabid animals and to help reduce the disease. Do not handle or feed wild animals or bring them into your home; place litter in closed garbage cans and teach your children not to handle any unfamiliar animals. If traveling abroad, take extra caution to avoid animals. In certain areas of the world, rabies in dogs is still a major problem and treatment might be difficult to obtain. According to the CDC, cases of human rabies in the United States are rare, with only one to three cases reported annually. Twenty-three cases of human rabies have been reported in the United States in the past decade (2008-2017). Eight of these were contracted outside of the U.S. and its territories.

It’s also recommended that animal caretakers keep pets supervised, and make sure to have them spayed or neutered to help reduce the number of unwanted animals who could go on to develop rabies.

In the Mountain State, the West Virginia Oral Rabies Vaccination Project has dramatically helped to reduce the disease by dropping baits that vaccinate raccoons against rabies in areas where the wild animals are likely to find them. The baits, which are not harmful to humans and their pets, should still be avoided.

The bait drop is a cooperative effort between the U.S. and West Virginia Departments of Agriculture, the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources (DNR), the West Virginia Bureau for Public Health and local health departments such as the Monongalia County Health Department.

When bait drops occur, the public will be notified to alert them that they might find the apparatus when out and about in rural areas.

To read more about rabies, check out www.cdc.gov/rabies/. To report a potentially rabid animal or an animal bite, call Environmental Health at the Monongalia County Health Department at 304-598-5131.

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