



Animal Bites and Rabies

APRIL 2015

ANIMAL HEALTH PROGRAM

Animal Health Unit

The Animal Health Unit is responsible for health monitoring and diagnosis of disease in wildlife and domestic animals in Yukon. The staff provide expertise in laboratory services and in veterinary medicine to support public health and animal protection.

The Animal Health Unit and laboratory are at 10 Burns Road, Whitehorse, Yukon.

Contact

Animal Health Unit

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Always treat animal bite wounds

Anyone bitten by an animal – domestic or wild – should seek medical attention right away because bite wounds can result in infection. A health care provider will:

- ▶ Wash away contamination from saliva, bacteria or viruses,
- ▶ Prescribe antibiotic drugs if bacterial infection is a concern,
- ▶ Provide a booster tetanus vaccination if it is needed, and
- ▶ Provide directions for at-home wound care, as well as what to do if there is swelling, redness or an increase in pain.

Although the likelihood of rabies infection is low in Yukon, rabies infection would be very serious so health care providers will typically notify a Health Officer about animal bites. The Health Officer will contact both the individual who receives medical treatment for an animal bite as well as the owner of the animal. The questions they ask about the incident will help determine whether rabies infection needs to be considered.

Rabies affects animals and humans

Rabies is present in wildlife in Alaska, B.C. and the Northwest Territories. Although rabies has not been detected in Yukon since the 1970s, it must always be considered when anyone is bitten by an animal here. Rabies is a serious brain infection that:

- ▶ Is spread in the saliva through the bite of an infected animal,
- ▶ Often causes an infected animal to act aggressively, and
- ▶ Is most often found in foxes, wolves and coyotes and sometimes in bats.

Rabies can be prevented in humans if a series of vaccines called rabies post-exposure prophylaxis (RPEP) is given soon after being bitten by an infected animal. The Yukon Chief Medical Officer of Health determines if RPEP should be given, using information provided by the patient and the animal owner (if available).

Assessing the risk of rabies being involved

Health Officers and Animal Health Unit veterinarians investigate animal bite incidents in order to determine if rabies is a possible risk to the patient or the public. They do not control, seize or euthanize animals that bite people.

Rabies in the North

Rabies is a serious, fatal brain disease spread by the saliva of infected animals. All mammals are susceptible to rabies.

Vaccination is the best protection for dogs and cats.

Rabies is fatal in almost every instance once signs of illness have developed.

In the north, rabies is most often spread to dogs from infected arctic foxes. The virus is found in other wild carnivores and bats and has been diagnosed in caribou as well.

A Health Officer will interview the patient and the owner of the animal (if a domestic animal was involved) to learn about the circumstances leading up to the bite. Accurate answers help the Yukon government's Animal Health Unit veterinarians determine whether the animal was acting normally or if rabies may be a possible cause. This helps the Chief Medical Officer of Health decide whether the patient needs RPEP.

Rabies risk in a domestic animal

Rabies vaccinations protect pets against the rabies virus and if the owner provides a current, valid vaccination certificate, rabies is no longer considered a possible risk. However, if the vaccination is not current or the certificate is not available, the animal will need to be observed for 10 days to confirm that rabies was not the cause of the biting behaviour. This involves:

- ▶ Confining the animal to the owner's property,
- ▶ Keeping the animal away from other animals and
- ▶ Notifying the Health Officer immediately of unusual behaviour.

In all instances to date in Yukon, the observed animals have remained healthy. Once the observation period is over, the animal should be vaccinated against rabies.

Signs that could indicate a rabies infection is present in an observed animal include:

- ▶ The animal threatens to bite or bites a person or animal,
- ▶ The animal develops any signs of illness, e.g., refusal to eat/drink, staggering, paralysis or a change in behaviour such as depression or agitation, or
- ▶ The animal dies.

Rabies risk in a wild animal

The information provided by the person bitten by a wild animal is critical for determining whether it was acting normally. It is usually not possible to identify the wild animal involved, live capture it and observe it for 10 days. If the wild animal was captured or killed at the time of the bite, the Chief Veterinary Officer should be notified so that the animal can be tested for rabies.

Reporting animal bites

Even when rabies is not present, animal bites can result in severe trauma, especially to children. Bylaw officers and the police enforce laws related to dangerous domestic animals. This process is separate from the medical assistance provided to the patient and the investigation by the Health Officer and Chief Veterinary Officer.

When a wild animal loses its fear of people, there can be many causes beyond rabies, such as improperly stored attractants. The goal is to minimize the risk of future biting incidents, no matter what the cause. Report sightings of unusual wild animal behaviour to the government's TIPP line at 1-800-661-0525 or www.env.gov.yk.ca/tipp.