

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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For More Information Contact

Michelle Peregoy, Public Information Officer (804) 864-7963

Cheryle Rodriguez, Central Region (804) 225-4590

Bobby Parker, Southwest Region (540) 381-7100 x 151

Larry Hill, Eastern Region (757) 683-2429

**HIGHEST NUMBER OF ANIMAL RABIES CASES REPORTED IN VIRGINIA
IN TWENTY-FIVE YEARS**

***Virginia Department of Health Urges Vaccinations for Pets during Rabies Awareness Week
March 10-15***

(Richmond, Va.) – In 2007, 730 cases of rabies in animals were reported to the Virginia Department of Health (VDH). This is the highest number of cases reported since 1982 when VDH received 745 reports. During Rabies Awareness Week, VDH, in partnership with the Virginia Veterinary Medicine Association, Virginia Animal Control Association and Virginia Federation of Humane Societies are stressing the importance of vaccinating companion animals, such as dogs and cats, against rabies.

In 2007, 36 cats and 5 dogs tested positive for rabies in Virginia. Among those cases, most of the animals were strays and/or not properly vaccinated. “You may be inclined to help a stray domestic animal or a sick, injured, or orphaned wild animal, but the animal could be infected with rabies. Feeding, picking up, or taking in such an animal could put you, your family, and your pets at risk of rabies,” explained State Health Commissioner, Karen Remley, M.D., M.B.A., F.A.A.P.

Keeping your pet’s immunizations up-to-date is the best way to protect yourself and your family from the deadly rabies virus. State law requires all dogs and cats over the age of four months to be vaccinated against rabies. Vaccines can be given as early as three months and one product is approved for kittens as young as eight weeks. Dog licenses are required throughout the state and some communities require licenses for cats.

Rabies is a deadly disease caused by a virus that attacks the nervous system. It kills almost any mammal or human that gets sick from it. “Animals sick with rabies shed the virus in their saliva, so any animal bite should be taken seriously,” said State Public Health Veterinarian Julia Murphy. “If an animal bites you, wash the wound immediately. Call your physician, local health department or animal control agency immediately.”

(more)

Raccoons continue to be the most commonly reported species with rabies in Virginia, with a total of 359 rabid raccoon cases in 2007. “In addition to keeping pets vaccinated it’s important to avoid contact with wild animals,” stressed Dr. Murphy. Rabies cases in Virginia are based on the number of animals that test positive for the disease. “As people become more aware of rabies and are in closer contact with animals such as raccoons and skunks that carry the virus, more animals are tested,” explained Murphy. “There are certainly more animals infected with rabies than the ones that are tested.”

For more information on rabies, log onto the Virginia Department of Health’s Rabies Control and Prevention Web site at www.vdh.virginia.gov/Epidemiology/DEE/Rabies/.

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