

The facts about raccoon rabies

Fall 2009

What is raccoon rabies?

- Raccoon rabies is a strain of rabies – an infectious and contagious disease of the central nervous system – spread mainly by raccoons. If left untreated, rabies may result in death. The rabies virus is concentrated in the saliva, mucus membranes and central nervous tissue of a rabid animal. Humans and other mammals can become infected through a cut or scratch from an animal with rabies, or if the rabies virus comes in contact with the moist tissues of the mouth, nose or eyes.

Is raccoon rabies different from other strains of rabies?

- It kills in the same way as other strains of rabies, but primarily raccoons spread it.

Why the heightened concern about raccoon rabies and where it is?

The strain of rabies (mid-Atlantic) carried and transmitted by raccoons has been moving northward toward Canada from the northeastern United States for many years. It was first noted in Florida in the 1940s and slowly traveled toward Ontario. The first case reported in Ontario was in an area northeast of Brockville in eastern Ontario in July 1999. To date, 132 cases have been reported in this same area. The last known case of raccoon rabies in Ontario was in September 2005.

Ontario has a large raccoon population, especially in urban areas. It's estimated that in urban areas there are approximately 8 to 18 raccoons per square kilometre. In rural areas, raccoon density may average 4 to 12 per square kilometre. This density (approximately 1.1 million raccoons in southern Ontario) makes it likely that people, pets and livestock may come into contact with them, and why it is important for all residents of Ontario to understand raccoon rabies and how to protect themselves and their families against the disease.

The response by the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources?

- The Rabies Research and Development Unit of the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources has a mandate to manage rabies in wildlife in this province. This unit prepared for several years for the invasion of raccoon rabies into Ontario, and has utilized different programs to successfully control and contain the disease.

Summary of MNR control programs:

- The Trap-Vaccinate-Release (TVR) program live-traps raccoons and skunks to vaccinate them against rabies. TVR of raccoons is being conducted along the St. Lawrence River and in the Niagara Peninsula.

- When a case of raccoon rabies is confirmed in Ontario, ministry staff implement a Point Infection Control program near the point of discovery, in an effort to contain the disease and its spread. This can involve trapping and humanely euthanizing raccoons and skunks within a 5-km radius of each case in a new area. It always includes trapping, vaccinating and releasing (TVR) raccoons, skunks, foxes, and feral cats within a further 5-10 km radius. Additionally, vaccine baits are distributed outside of but surrounding the TVR zone as a final buffer against the spread of the disease. Each new case is assessed on an individual basis to determine whether a PIC should be modified. If a new case occurs in an area which has recently been treated for raccoon rabies, the PIC will be modified and animals will not be euthanized unless they appear or behave abnormally.
- Ministry staff also conduct aerial distribution of baits containing vaccine to vaccinate both raccoons and foxes. In addition to delivering the vaccine baits by low-flying aircraft, hand baiting is also done in target urban areas. About 12,000 baits are dropped each August to control the spread of raccoon rabies in eastern Ontario.
- As part of the North American Rabies Management Plan, the Rabies Unit completed the Canadian Rabies Management Plan in March 2008 with partnering organizations. The plan examines current rabies management, addresses strengths and weaknesses, and implements research and rabies control efforts. The plan encompasses the Appalachian Ridge and the border areas of Canada and the United States, and from Ontario east into Canada's other provinces vulnerable to raccoon invasion.

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Contact:
Natalie Gorman
Rabies Research and Development Unit
705-755-1551

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