Rabies is alive and well. It is easy to contract and has the highest case-fatality rate of any infectious disease, annually killing more than 55,000 people around the world. But it is also easy to prevent, and it is your responsibility to take the simple but necessary steps to keep your family safe.

**what is rabies?**
Perhaps the oldest documented infectious disease, rabies is a virus that is most commonly found in raccoons, bats, skunks, foxes, cats, dogs, cattle and horses — but is transmissible to all warm-blooded animals, including humans. The virus is found primarily in nervous tissue and saliva, and as such, is most often transmitted through animal bites. Once an animal is bitten, the virus incubates over a 15- to 50-day period. During this period and before symptoms begin to appear, the disease is undetectable. However, once an animal begins to exhibit the symptoms, rabies is inevitably fatal.

**what are the symptoms?**
While different species exhibit the disease in different ways, the number one sign of infection is a change in behavior. In addition, a rabies-infected animal will have a low-grade fever and may show self-mutilation at the bite site, often followed by anorexia and lethargy. The animal will also urinate more frequently and tend to seek solitude.

As the disease progresses, it enters into either a paralytic or furious stage. Dogs are more likely to present in the paralytic stage, during which the animal will often exhibit a dropped lower jaw and salivate profusely but be unable to swallow, due to paralysis of throat and jaw muscles. In the furious stage, which is more common for cats, the animal becomes irrational and viciously aggressive.

**how is rabies prevented?**
Prevention is geared toward mass vaccination of all domestic animals and high-risk wild animals, as well as controlling the stray dog and cat populations. Your part in rabies prevention is simple: vaccinate your pets (required in some Ohio counties), and avoid unfamiliar animals you encounter. If your occupation increases your risk of exposure to rabid animals or you are traveling to a country with a higher incidence of rabies, you may want to ask your doctor about pre-exposure vaccination.

If you or your pet are exposed to the virus, it is imperative that you take immediate action. Wash the wound thoroughly with antibacterial soap and water before calling your doctor or veterinarian. Humans will need to get a rabies immunoglobulin vaccination, followed by a series of four doses of the rabies vaccine.

Provided by the Ohio Veterinary Medical Association Public Education Committee. Learn more online at www.ohiovma.org.

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