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Did You Know:

Pisgah National Forest in Haywood County is part of the National Forest Scenic Byway, a 79-mile loop.

Incident exposes dozens to rabies in Haywood County

Letters went out this week from the Haywood County Health Department to about 43 county residents who may have been exposed to rabies as a result of a baby raccoon a family was caring for that later died and tested positive for rabies.

The raccoon died of rabies infection on Aug. 13. Prior to its death it was handled by many adults and children during the time that it was not yet showing symptoms. The letter advised any person who may have been exposed to the raccoon between June 21 and August 16 to be seen by their doctor or health care provider for a rabies Post Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP) assessment.

This marked the second incident since early July where dozens of people may have been exposed to rabies through situations that could have been prevented, said Julia Plemmons, Nursing Director for the Haywood County Health Department. The first occurred in July when about 43 campers were exposed to bats while sleeping in buildings where bats were present. While none of the bats were captured and assessed for rabies, the Health Department advised all campers to get a PEP assessment and 31 complied and began treatment.

According to Plemmons, the raccoon incident began when a family member found a baby raccoon on the side of the road and decided to bring it home to care for it. For the next several weeks, many family members and friends handled the raccoon and assisted with feeding it. As a result, some of the people who handled the raccoon were bitten or scratched or had other contact that might have exposed them to rabies.

"The most common type of exposure that transmits rabies is a bite from a rabid animal," Plemmons said. "People may also be exposed when saliva from the animal gets into fresh, open cuts in the skin or mucous membranes, such as the eyes, nose and mouth."

Rabies is a fatal disease in humans, but getting prompt treatment can prevent it from developing. Plemmons said it was important that treatment begin before the onset of any symptoms of rabies. Plemmons said many of the people the Health Department has talked to who handled the raccoon could not recall whether they had been directly exposed or not, but their contact with the animal had been frequent enough for the Health Department to recommend treatment.

"The time between exposure and development of symptoms can vary a lot," Plemmons said. "It may be a few weeks for some people or several months for others. That's why we recommend that anyone who may have been exposed to rabies contact their health care provider and begin treatment as soon as possible."

Treatment consists of a series of four shots of rabies vaccine on Days 0, 3, 7 and 14 and an injection of Human Rabies Immune Globulin (HRIG) on Day 0. Rabies vaccines are given in the arm in adults or leg in infants and are delivered over a two-week period. As with all vaccines, Plemmons said mild side effects may occur.

"Some people may experience local reactions, such as pain, skin rash, swelling or itching at the injection site," she said. "Other reactions could be headache, nausea and muscle aches. It is unlikely that anyone would have side effects that would warrant discontinuing the treatment."

In addition to treating family members and friends who were exposed to the baby raccoon, Haywood County Animal Control planned to take custody of the family's pet dog today because the dog did not have a current rabies vaccine. State law requires that pets be quarantined for six months if the pet may have been exposed and a rabies vaccine is not current. The pet must either be quarantined at Animal Control or a veterinarian's office at the owner's expense or euthanized.

According to the N.C. Wildlife Commission, it is against state law for citizens to keep wildlife without a permit. Mike Caraway, a Haywood County-based wildlife biologist with the Commission, said the incident has been reported to state authorities.

In an annual press release issued last spring, the Commission cautioned citizens against picking up and handling wild animals no matter what the circumstances.

"Wild animals are not pets, and they are not meant to be raised and fed by humans," David Cobb, chief of the Commission's Division of Wildlife Management, stated in the release.

The release stated that many young animals that look abandoned often are not. Many species do not stay with their young and only return to feed them.

The Haywood County bat incident was one of three reported around the state since the last week of June, prompting North Carolina Public Health Veterinarian Carl Williams to issue an Urgent Public Health Advisory regarding bat exposure and rabies. The Advisory calls for local health departments to contact camp sites under inspection by the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) in their jurisdiction to verify that annual inspections have occurred with a particular emphasis on determining if bats are present.

In the Haywood County incident, the bat was discovered in a cabin, it was caught and Animal Control was notified. However, a camp staff member decided to release the bat, which meant it couldn't be tested for rabies. As a result, the Health Department assessed the individuals for exposure and recommended that the exposed campers receive treatment, including rabies PEP assessment.

"The risk with bats is that people can be bitten and not know it," Plemmons said. "Their teeth are so small that contact may not feel any different than an insect bite. If bats are flying around where people are sleeping, it could bite a person and they wouldn't even know it."

Plemmons said if the bat could have been tested for rabies & it had come back negative, no one would have had to receive treatment for rabies.

The advisory from Williams states that the incidents that occurred in North Carolina, including the Haywood County incident, could also have been avoided if the facilities were inspected for bats, especially those that gained access to sleeping quarters. The Advisory stated that cabins and other buildings used for sleeping should be inspected every spring before the camp opens and periodically during the season.

Camp inspections are governed by DENR rules and can be viewed at <http://www.deh.enr.state.nc.us/ehs/rules.htm>. In addition, guidance on how to bat proof a building is available at http://www.batcon.org/pdfs/education/fof_ug.pdf and <http://www.cdc.gov/rabies/bats/management/index.html>.

For questions on rabies in Haywood County, please contact Animal Control at 456-5338 or the Health Department at 452-6675. There is also a wealth of information on rabies available on the web from the Epidemiology Division of North Carolina Public Health at www.epi.state.nc.us/epi/rabies/, or from the federal Centers for Disease Control at www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/rabies/.

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