

RABIES

Rabies. For those who are Baby Boomers, those of the Greatest Generation, and back through history, that word had the same effect as close gunfire. It meant immediate danger, immediate possibility of certain death. A rabid animal, or even an animal that was suspected of being rabid, was shot on the spot. It did not matter if it was a wild animal, a beloved pet, a prized bull or a champion horse. Now the younger generations seem to have lost that sense of danger. Many seem complacent; they are lackadaisical about rabies vaccinations for their own pets and about exposing themselves or their children to animals of unknown vaccination history, or to wild animals.

How did this happen? Is rabies somehow less dangerous? What is the big deal anyway? For one thing, due to modern medicine we rarely see anyone contract rabies. Going back to the 1960's and before, almost everyone knew of someone who had either died of Rabies or who had a very close call. The prophylactic treatment for those who had been exposed was rough. It was a series of injections under the skin for 21 days. Since this vaccine was grown in duck embryos, most people had intense reactions to the injections (think tetanus shot 100 times worse). Because of the immense swelling and inflammation, the injections were given in the skin of the belly so that there was room to accommodate this painful swelling. And Rabies was everywhere there were animals. A friend who is a Salisbury native told me of occasions during outbreaks when the authorities confiscated and destroyed all the dogs and cats that were in the city.

In order to protect people, the medical community (human and veterinary) decided the best plan was to create a buffer zone for people by requiring that all dogs and cats be vaccinated against rabies. Laws were passed and many rabies vaccination clinics were given. Veterinarians would go door to door to vaccinate any animals there. And the plan worked! It is working still. Another step to protect the public was making animal bites a reportable incident. The CDC requires by law that physicians report to local authorities any animal bites that they treat. The animal is then quarantined for 10 days. If at the end of 10 days the animal is still healthy, then the bite victim was safe from Rabies exposure. And the post exposure treatment today is both effective and mild.

So is there any Rabies around today? Do we still need to be vigilant? Is getting pets vaccinated still extremely important? The answer is YES!! Rabies is all around us, in the wild life. Our pets often come in contact with wild life, usually without the owner being aware. We NEED that buffer. In a 10 year period from 1996 to 2006, there were an average of 618 confirmed cases **per year** of Rabies in North Carolina, with an average of 29 cases per year in Rowan County. These are only those suspected animals that had contact with people or with pets. Rabid animals that were killed but did not expose anyone to a bite or to their saliva are not counted in these statistics. Who are the main culprits? By far it is the raccoon. Nearly 80% of these cases were raccoons, followed by a distant second with skunks then foxes. Encouraging wild life into our yards is a dangerous practice. Those cute raccoons are all potential rabid animals. Think of your children! Among domestic animals, the number one culprit by far is cats. This is not surprising since most people are much more diligent about having their dogs vaccinated and the cats not so much. Over the same time period there were 195 confirmed cases of rabies in cats in

North Carolina. There were 73 confirmed cases of rabies in dogs. It cannot be stressed enough that for the safety of your family, have ALL of your pets vaccinated.