

Pet Talk with Turner Veterinary Service: Why does my pet need a rabies vaccination?

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Rabies is a virus that affects the brain and central nervous system. It causes fever, irritability, aggression, seizures, paralysis and eventually death. Many mammals are at risk for contracting rabies, including people, but it is most commonly thought of as a disease of wild animals, especially raccoons, skunks, foxes and bats.

The virus is transmitted from an animal in its saliva, most frequently from a bite wound. Anytime saliva enters the blood stream, there is a risk of contracting the disease. Because the central nervous system is affected, animals with rabies behave strangely. Nocturnal animals may be seen during daylight hours and may seem very friendly towards people. This is not normal behavior for a wild animal! If you see a wild animal acting like this, contact your animal control officer immediately.

Because the disease can be contracted by people, it is a law in Maine (and all 50 states) that all pet dogs and cats receive rabies vaccinations. Initial vaccinations are given as young as 12 weeks of age with a booster the following year. After receiving the initial vaccine and the annual booster, vaccination is only required every three years.

It is important to keep the documentation you receive when your pet gets vaccinated because this is proof that the vaccine was given on that date. The date the vaccine was given can help determine if a booster is required in one year or three years.

For our pets, it is important to keep their vaccines current because that can affect the course of treatment required if your dog or cat is bitten by another animal. Cats that spend a lot of time outdoors can get in squabbles with other outdoor cats. These battles frequently result in wounds that fester and become abscessed. These open wounds can transmit the rabies virus to other animals and family members. If cats are kept current on rabies vaccines, they are protected from contracting the disease and spreading it to other pets and family members.

It is important to prevent this deadly disease by following just a few easy steps. Vaccinate all of your beloved pets — it is required even for indoor cats. Don't encourage wild animals to stay near your home. Report any wild animal acting strangely to your animal control officer.