



## **WILLIAMSON COUNTY AND CITIES HEALTH DISTRICT**

### **NEWS RELEASE**

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

### **OFFICIALS URGE VACCINATIONS FOR DOGS AND CATS**

April 11, 2011 (Williamson County) – This year Williamson County has already had 11 bats, 15 skunks, & 1 raccoon in Williamson County test positive for rabies. A man working underneath a vehicle in northern Williamson County was recently bitten by a rabid skunk. Fortunately, the bite victim reported this encounter, sought medical attention quickly, and started post exposure rabies vaccinations before the lab test verified the animal was rabid. Williamson County and Cities Health District (WCCHD) officials urge residents to take steps protect themselves and their pets from the deadly virus.

Each year many cases of rabies develop throughout Texas in both wild and domestic animals. According to the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the signs of rabies in animals include:

- Changes in an animal's behavior
- General sickness
- Problems swallowing
- An increase in drool or saliva
- Wild animals that appear abnormally tame, sick, disoriented, fearless, or aggressive
- Animals that may bite at everything if excited
- Difficulty moving or paralysis.

The Williamson County Local Health Authority, Dr. Chip Riggins, advises, "If you see an animal exhibiting the above symptoms, Do Not Touch or Handle the Animal. Call your local animal control agency immediately. There are steps to be taken if dogs, cats or other livestock with or without current rabies vaccinations come into contact with a possibly rabid animal so the important thing is that folks recognize this abnormal behavior and report it to our Animal Control Agencies," said Dr. Riggins.

Rabies is a virus disease of the central nervous system that can affect all warm-blooded animals including humans. It is most often transmitted by the bite of a rabid animal or through the saliva of that animal into a fresh scratch or skin break. A series of post-exposure shots, if given in time, can prevent rabies from developing. Once symptoms develop, rabies is almost always fatal.

Officials state the best ways to protect your pets and family from the disease is to control the cases of rabies in the area by:

- Immunizing your family pets. Contact your veterinarian for information on rabies vaccination for your pet. Even animals kept in yards need to be vaccinated. Owners

should not let their pets roam free. Visit your veterinarian or community-sponsored vaccination clinic to receive the rabies vaccination.

- Register and license your pets in a reputable program often run by local governments or non-profit agencies.

Cheryl Schneider, who is the director of the Williamson County Regional Animal Shelter, encourages animal owners to make sure their animals' rabies vaccinations are up to date. "City ordinances and state law requires anyone keeping or owning a dog or cat 16 weeks of age or older to have that animal vaccinated against rabies," she said. "Vaccinating your pets may prevent the animal from being euthanized if it comes in contact with a rabid animal."

"Many vaccines for pets and livestock will protect the animals from illnesses such as parvo in dogs or sleeping sickness in horses, but the rabies vaccine is a key step in guarding public health," Schneider said. "It protects the animals as well as their human family. In Texas, a puppy should be vaccinated when it is old enough and then again a year later; after that, the three-year vaccine can be used. The rabies vaccines are incredibly effective...they serve to save dogs and cats and in doing so, protect the humans that come in contact with them."

Schneider also urged animal owners not to leave pet food outside. Presence of pet food could draw high-risk animals including skunks, raccoons, foxes, coyotes and bats. "This can increase a pet's chance of being exposed to rabies," Schneider said. "A lot of people don't realize there are skunks that live in all of our housing areas right in the middle of town," she said. "It's not safe to assume you won't see them because you live inside the city limits. They're definitely here, too."

Be sure to talk to your children about rabies and staying away from wild animals or cats and dogs unfamiliar to you. Children must know to report finding a bat immediately and to never, under any circumstances, handle or play with a bat. If you see a skunk, bat, raccoon or other nocturnal animal that is active during the day or seems to be sick, fearless or aggressive, you should contact Animal Control right away. Animal Services asks residents not to capture or shoot the animal. An animal cannot be tested for rabies if it has been shot in the head.

"Education is important because the illness can be so serious," Riggins said. "Early post-exposure treatment can help keep the disease from progressing, but once symptoms begin, there is really nothing that will help," he said. "Testing has proven that rabies is currently present in a large percentage of skunks, bats, and even raccoons in our community which makes vaccination of our pets and reporting of abnormal behavior and possible exposures to abnormally-behaving wild animals all the more important," he added.

The numbers for Williamson County Animal Control offices are:

Cedar Park 512-258-3149  
Hutto 512-759-5985  
Leander 512-259-6495  
Round Rock 512-255-7387  
Taylor 512-352-5483  
Williamson County 512-943-1300

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