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Agency Says Shots Needed to End Spike in Equine Rabies

It's easy to fall in love with country living, and more Texans each year are moving to places where deer are greater road hazards than texting teenagers and more of your neighbors live in burrows or hollow trees than condos.

This cozy relationship with the natural world is a major attraction for urban refugees. Unfortunately, it also increases the risk of rabies infection among domestic animals that find themselves surrounded by skunks, foxes, coyotes and other frequent disease carriers.

The good news is that public health officials say we're doing a good job of protecting our household pets with scheduled rabies vaccinations. But it's not just cats and dogs that are at risk. The Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) also reports a recent spike in confirmed rabies infections among horses.

"Rabies affects only mammals, and horses are mammals," said Shelley Stonecipher, a zoonosis control veterinarian for DSHS. "We've seen an alarming increase in equine rabies in my region. In Erath County alone, we've had five positive tests this year, all as a result of skunk bites. There were also rabid horses reported in Eastland and Hunt Counties [one case each] and two cases from Johnson county this year."

Unlikely as the skunk-bites-horse scenario may sound, it's surprisingly common. Horses — foals and yearlings in particular — are curious by nature. The sight of an erratically behaving skunk may tempt them to move in for a closer look, sometimes resulting in a nip to the nose or lip.

"People in rural areas have always had horses, so I doubt that this is anything new," Stonecipher said. "However, as we find ourselves with many more humans and domestic animals in proximity to skunks, foxes, coyotes and so forth, that increases the chances for exposure. That's why we're encouraging all horse owners, especially those who live in rural areas, to get their animals vaccinated. Ask your veterinarian about the recommended vaccination schedules for your animals."

How to Keep Animals — and Yourself — Safe

Although equine rabies is uncommon, DSHS wants Texans to do their part to keep it that way. If you believe a horse or any other domestic animal, vaccinated or not, may have been exposed to a rabid animal, contact your local animal control agency. They'll be able to provide guidance on proper followup for your animal. including getting tissue samples from the suspected rabid animal (if possible) to DSHS for testing if necessary. Because rabies can be transmitted from rabid horses to humans, people who've been exposed to a rabid horse should consult their medical provider to discuss post-exposure vaccinations.

Signs that a horse may have rabies include:

- Fever
- Loss of appetite or refusal to eat
- Blindness
- Difficulty in swallowing
- Muscle twitching
- Lameness
- Incontinence
- Progressive paralysis

For more information on rabies and prevention, check DSHS' rabies web page at www.dshs.state.tx.us/idcu/disease/rabies.

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