

Canine Distemper Epizootic in Local Raccoons

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On April 16th, 2010, the WA Animal Diagnostic Disease Laboratory in two King County raccoons confirmed canine distemper: one from Bellevue; and one from Redmond. Other raccoons with clinical signs of distemper have been reported to Public Health from Renton, North Bend, and elsewhere in north/northeast King County. PAWS Wildlife Center in Lynnwood has seen about 8 clinical cases in raccoons so far this year.

Distemper can cause encephalitis and the clinical presentation may look like rabies. Signs of distemper in raccoons include green ocular and nasal discharge, diarrhea, coughing, dyspnea, emaciation, lethargy, disorientation, slow stumbling gait, circling, muscle twitches, paralysis, and seizures. Sick raccoons are generally not afraid of people or pets and have been found in atypical places like outside restaurants, on school grounds, and in other high traffic public areas requiring police or animal control response in a number of instances recently. Distemper virus is shed in all body secretions of infected animals. The virus is highly contagious with a high fatality rate. The incubation period in dogs is 1-2 weeks. Neurologic signs may develop 1-3 weeks after recovery from GI and respiratory signs, although neurologic impairment sometimes does not occur until months later, even without a history of systemic signs. Thankfully canine distemper is not zoonotic, but it can affect other wildlife including coyotes, skunks, ferrets, weasels, and harbor seals. It does not affect domestic cats.

Distemper virus typically does not persist in the environment for more a few hours and it is readily inactivated by most commonly used disinfectants. Wildlife epizootic outbreaks tend to occur cyclically and appear when the population is high, which seems to be the case with local raccoon numbers. It has been reported that distemper outbreaks in raccoons are often seasonal, with peak incidence in the spring (coinciding with breeding season) and in the fall (when young raccoons disperse from their dams).

In addition to the risk posed to wildlife and domestic dogs and ferrets, Public Health is concerned about the outbreak because it may lead to more people coming into contact with raccoons -- thereby requiring evaluation for potential rabies exposure, more lab testing of wildlife for rabies and/or recommendations for post-exposure rabies prophylaxis. Raccoons are also associated with other public health risks including leptospirosis and Baylisascaris. Veterinarians should be especially vigilant in getting dogs vaccinated and educating pet owners. These are some of the key points to make with clients:

- Do not attract raccoons to your home.
- NEVER FEED WILDLIFE – either intentionally or inadvertently. Keep pet food and water bowls indoors, especially at night. Keep trash in sealed containers. Look for other food sources that may be attracting raccoons such as bird seed, chicken food, compost bins, and garden crops especially grapes, berries, and fruit.
- Cap chimneys, repair broken or missing vents and shingles on roofs. Seal access to spaces under homes, decks and outbuildings.

- Secure dog or cat doors at night – we are hearing reports of raccoons entering pet doors and raiding cupboards or eating pet food inside homes.
- Don't let dogs outside alone at night. If raccoons may be present, have owners take dogs outside on a leash for relieving at dusk or after dark. That last potty break before bed is the source of many unfortunate dog/raccoon encounters.
- If captured, never relocate a live raccoon. If a person picks up a live raccoon or captures one in a live trap, it must not be moved and released at another location. This action is illegal and could be responsible for introducing distemper or other diseases into previously unaffected areas. Instead, a licensed Nuisance Wildlife Control Officer should be called who will humanely euthanize the animal. See contact information in the Resource section below.
- If you encounter a sick raccoon, keep people and pets away from it. Pets bitten by a raccoon should be seen by a veterinarian for wound care and receive a rabies booster. People bitten should contact their health care provider and Public Health: 206-296-4774.
- Avoid exposure to raccoon feces. Most raccoons carry the round worm Baylisascaris, which can cause severe ocular or visceral larva migrans in people, especially young children.
- Avoid exposure to standing water, mud or moist soil that may be contaminated by raccoon urine. Raccoon are believed to be responsible for many of the cases of canine leptospirosis that have occurred in King County over the past several years. People can also acquire leptospirosis from contact with contaminated water or garden soil. (See link below.) Resources:
- People bitten by a raccoon should call their health care provider and Public Health: 206-296-4774.
- Public Health maintains information about zoonotic diseases associated with raccoons:
<http://www.kingcounty.gov/healthservices/health/ehs/zoonotics/raccoons.aspx>
- Baylisascaris and raccoon latrine clean up information:
<http://www.kingcounty.gov/healthservices/health/ehs/zoonotics/diseases.aspx#raccoon>
- King County residents who encounter raccoons with signs of canine distemper can call KCACC: 206-296-PETS
- WA Dept. of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) offers advice for dealing with problem wildlife at their website:
<http://wdfw.wa.gov/wlm/living/>
- PAWS Wildlife Center can offer tips on solving and preventing conflicts by calling: 425-787-2500, ext. 817
- WDFW also maintains a list of Nuisance Wildlife Control Operators who are licensed to respond to problem wildlife. Contact information can be found at <http://wdfw.wa.gov/enforcement/nwco/> or by calling WDFW No. Puget Sound Reg. Office: 425-775 1311.