

# **Rabies lives in Montana; prevention protects us**

**By Casey Saul**

RiverStone Health received an average of 10 animal bite reports every week for the first half of this year. That includes 180 dog bites, 65 cat bites, one mouse bite, one squirrel bite and one bat bite.

Beyond the pain, injury and distress that may result from animal bites, there can be a risk of rabies – a virtually always fatal viral disease that can be prevented, but not cured. Rabies can be transmitted in the saliva of infected mammals. This virus attacks the brain and central nervous system, killing about 55,000 people worldwide every year.

Montana law requires that cases of rabies in animals be reported to the Department of Livestock. In the first six months of 2023, the DOL confirmed cases of rabies in skunks in Powder River County and rabies in bats in Flathead and Saunders counties. Last year, DOL confirmed rabies in one dog, 10 bats and two skunks statewide. One of the rabid bats was in Yellowstone County; the dog was in Big Horn County.

Prevention of rabies is the reason Montana law requires animal bites to be reported to the local public health agency, which is RiverStone Health in Yellowstone County. When we receive a bite report, a Public Health disease prevention specialist phones the bite victim or the parent, if the person bitten is a child. By assessing the circumstances of the case, the species of animal involved and the animal's rabies vaccination status, we provide recommendations based on the best medical science to prevent a person from developing rabies.

Our assessment may indicate that the bitten person is at risk for rabies infection and is recommended to receive a series of after-bite injections to prevent the disease. In the first seven months of this year, at least eight people in Yellowstone County received the four-dose series of after-bite rabies shots. This treatment prevents the fatal disease, but can cost thousands of dollars.

If the biting animal is a cat, dog or ferret with proof of current rabies vaccination from a licensed veterinarian, the rabies risk is almost zero. The animal's owner may have to quarantine it for a while. If the animal hasn't been vaccinated against rabies or isn't current, state statute authorizes law enforcement officials to impound the animal for quarantine or to euthanize it.

Montana law doesn't require pets to be vaccinated against rabies. However, the city of Billings, other Montana cities and counties have ordinances requiring rabies vaccination for pets living within the local jurisdiction. For more information about Billings Animal Control services, call 406-657-8227 between 10 a.m. and 6 p.m. weekdays.

Pet owners who keep their animals' vaccinations up to date are protecting their furry friends, people around them and other animals from this fatal disease. The success of preventing rabies in our nation and state is the result of vigilance by human and animal health professionals and animal owners acting responsibly.

*Casey Saul is a communicable disease interventionist at RiverStone Health. To report an animal bite, phone 406-247-2129 or email [animal.bites@riverstonehealth.org](mailto:animal.bites@riverstonehealth.org).*