

Rabies Awareness Month information now on internet

HEALTH

May is Rabies Awareness Month. In recognition of the fact, the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources will upgrade its use of the internet to provide people with information they can use to effectively protect themselves and their families from rabies.

"Public awareness and knowledge are vital to the fight against the spread of rabies," said Natural Resources Minister Chris Hodgson recently as the awareness month was officially launched.

"Our materials, including our web site, contain information that will help everyone to recognize the signs of rabies and to know how to protect themselves if they encounter an animal suspected of being rabid."

The MNR's internet web site has been added to its program of public education and immunization of foxes and raccoons, as ways to promote the protection of public health. The web site features Be Smart About Rabies, which includes a cartoon sequence explaining rabies. Another addition is Links, which will connect users to other rabies-related web sites.

The web site, which is at <http://www.mnr.gov.on.ca/MNR/rabies/rabmenu.html>, contains a series of fact sheets.

This information may also be obtained from local community health unit offices or at the Natural Resources Information Centre, Room M1-73, Macdonald Block, 900 Bay Street, Toronto, Ontario M7A 2C1, or by calling (416) 314-2000.

"Our rabies information program discusses the simple yet effective steps people can take to increase their protection against rabies," said Hodgson. "One is to vaccinate pets against rabies each year. Another is to avoid wild animals."

Anyone coming in contact with an animal suspected of being rabid should get immediate medical attention.

The spread of rabies can be prevented by keeping pets confined or on a leash, and by warning children to stay away from wild, stray, or aggressive animals.

Do not touch bats or raccoons. Bat-proofing and raccoon-proofing houses and cottages will reduce chances of contact.

The ministry is continuing to monitor raccoon rabies, which has spread from the southern United States to New York State.

It has not yet entered Ontario, but the disease has reached the U.S. side of the province's southern border. The MNR has set up a raccoon immunization program, which the ministry hopes will contain or slow the spread of raccoon rabies by creating a buffer zone of protection.

The Ontario Raccoon Rabies Task Force, which has responsibility for rabies control, has a strategic plan in place for countering the spread of raccoon rabies, including a program of preventive action.

The MNR is also continuing its successful program to eliminate fox rabies in Ontario.

In the MNR's bait program, bait containing vaccine is dropped from aircraft over rural areas. After eating the bait, foxes are immunized against rabies.

The work began in eastern Ontario

in 1989 and a 30,000-square-kilometre area was declared rabies-free in 1996. The bait pro-

gram was spread across southern Ontario in 1994. From 1980-1989, there were about 2,000

rabid animals reported each year in Ontario. In 1996, there were only 156 rabid animals reported.

This is a good indication of the decline in the overall population of rabid animals in the province.



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