

## NEWS COLUMN

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### South Dakota Rabies Cases Double in 2009

Diagnosed rabies cases in the state of South Dakota were dramatically up last year. The number reported in 2008 was a historical low of only 24 cases. In 2009 this number tallied 53. Over 60% of the cases both years came from skunks. Other cases diagnosed came from dogs, bats, cattle, horses, cats and one lone goat.

The SDSU Animal Disease Research Diagnostic Lab in Brookings and the State Department of Health Lab in Pierre are the only two facilities in the state that perform rabies testing on animal specimens.

Each spring and summer, the risk of rabies exposure increases as wild animals become more active and people spend more time outdoors.

Because infected animals can easily pass the virus to pets or domestic animals, few areas in South Dakota or the rest of the nation are free from rabies. In South Dakota, skunks are most frequently reported as rabid and are the major carrier to domestic animals.

Rabies shots for dogs and cats and stricter animal control laws have reduced the threat of rabies to humans, but the problem still exists. In the past years, both dogs and cats have tested positive for rabies in South Dakota. Virtually all of these animals are unvaccinated.

All dogs and cats should be vaccinated against rabies at three months of age and then re-vaccinated according to specific vaccine or licensing requirements. Though it's impractical to vaccinate all livestock against rabies, vaccines are available for cattle, sheep and horses. It is recommended to vaccinate livestock that are particularly valuable or have frequent contact with humans.

In addition to vaccinating domestic animals with approved vaccines, other precautions can reduce the risk of exposure to animals.

- Don't handle or attempt to feed any wild animals. Teach children to avoid wildlife, strays or animals they don't know. Make sure they tell you immediately if they are bitten or scratched by any animals.
- Avoid any animal, wild or domestic, that behaves strangely and report it to your local animal control or law enforcement office.
- Don't handle dead, sick, or injured animals. If you must handle such animals, use heavy gloves, sticks or other tools too avoid direct contact. Farmers and ranchers in particular should wear gloves and protective eye wear when treating sick animals to protect themselves against exposure to saliva.
- Because garbage attracts animals like skunks and raccoons, keep outdoor trash containers tightly closed.
- In rural areas clear wood or junk piles away from dwellings to discourage wild animals from moving in.

In spite of these precautions, if you or a family member is exposed to possible rabies, thoroughly wash the affected area **immediately** with soap and water. **Then call your doctor or health department.** If the animal is dead, save the carcass for laboratory examination. Be careful not to damage the head. The brain is the vital tissue for testing and accurate analysis. If the animal is alive, try to capture it for examination or observation but be sure to avoid further exposure. If the animal escapes, note its description for later identification.

According to medical professionals if you are exposed to rabies remember that safe and effective vaccinations are available. Anti-rabies treatment has proven 100% effective when administered without delay.