

## Skunk Rabies Making a Comeback in Eastern Colorado

Today, we think of diseases such as rabies as something from the distant past, or from fiction, such as the book and movie “Old Yeller.” In public health, we continue to track rabies because the disease occurs in our county at low levels and only in certain animal populations, such as bats – but that still means a risk to our community from a fatal infectious disease.

And right now it’s important to know that eastern Colorado is experiencing a resurgence of rabies in skunks, and the resurgence raises the chances that either a person or their pet can get exposed to rabies from a skunk bite. Fourteen cases of the kind of rabies that skunks carry have been found in eastern Colorado wildlife in the last year, 13 in skunks and one in a coyote. That level of rabies activity has not been reported in at least 20 years. The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment is very concerned that skunk rabies may be moving toward the Front Range, toward our county.

For perspective, the last time a skunk was tested to have rabies in El Paso County was in 1970, but wildlife have been found to be infected with skunk rabies in Arapahoe, Kit Carson and Kiowa counties, just one county away.

Rabies infection is spread primarily through the bite of rabid animals, or when saliva from an infected animal gets into open wounds, cuts or enters into the eyes, nose, or mouth. Wildlife most prone to rabies infection includes bats, skunks, foxes and raccoons.

People who are exposed to rabies can receive life-saving medication (shots), but if untreated, rabies is fatal. Period.

**In response to this emerging threat, let me tell you first what we’re doing here at the Health Department.** With the cooperation of the Department of Transportation, we are helping the State Health Department test skunks found dead along roadways on the eastern portion of our county to see if any are infected with rabies. The areas most of interest to public health scientists right now are those east of Powers Boulevard, so Falcon is an area of concern to us..

We are diligently working with agencies involved with animal control to assure that people who are bit by an animal are properly assessed in terms of rabies exposure. And we are alerting the public to keep their pets up to date on rabies vaccine.

Our goal is to determine whether skunk rabies has entered El Paso County and to keep the public informed they can take steps to protect themselves, their pets and livestock. **Now let me tell you what you need to do to stay safe:**

- Make sure that your dogs and cats are vaccinated for rabies, especially if they are likely to be outdoors. Rabies in cats and dogs has been extremely low for several decades because of widespread vaccination of domestic pets. But if skunk rabies continues to spread, our pets may now be at increased risk and could pose a danger to people.
- Don’t feed wild animals or allow your pets around them. Be sure to educate children to stay away from wild animals.
- Contact your veterinarian if your dog or cat is bitten or scratched by a wild animal, such as skunks, bats, foxes or raccoons.
- If you suspect you’ve been exposed to rabies, contact your physician without delay.
- Discuss rabies vaccination of your livestock with your veterinarian. Vaccination may be considered for horses and other equines, breeding livestock, dairy cattle or other high value livestock.
- If you find a dead skunk, stay away from it if you can. If it’s on your property and you need to remove it, do not touch the animal directly. Instead, lift the carcass with a shovel or other tool, and double-bag it for the trash.

Protecting our community from many disease threats is our mission at the Health Department, and we are monitoring the rabies situation closely. We will keep you updated, but if you have questions, please contact us at (719) 578-3199.

**Colorado Confirmed Rabies Cases in Wildlife, 2007-08:**

- Prowers County: 2 (1 coyote and 1 skunk)
- Washington County: 1 (skunk)
- Mesa County: 1 (skunk)
- Las Animas County: 1 (skunk)
- Kit Carson County: 1 (skunk)
- Yuma County 2 (skunk)
- Kiowa County 3 (skunk)
- Arapahoe 2 (skunk)
- Cheyenne 1 (skunk)
- Baca 1 (skunk)

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