

## You Can Help Stop a Killer

Sept. 28 marks the second annual World Rabies Day

BY CATHLEEN HANLON AND PETER COSTA

**R**abies is a zoonotic viral disease that can be transmitted to animals and humans. The disease is transmitted mainly by bite, but exposure may also occur through contamination of broken skin or mucous membranes with saliva from an infected animal. Once neurological symptoms of the disease develop, rabies is fatal to both animals and humans.

The good news is that rabies is easily preventable. Vaccination prior to possible exposure is a crucial part of health management of domestic animals, and is the single most important factor in rabies prevention.

The United States has made considerable progress in the fight against rabies. The main threat of dog-to-dog transmission of rabies and related human exposure was eliminated in the 1950s and '60s through mandatory dog vaccination and stray control. However, rabies is still present in wildlife in the U.S., and presents a threat of infection to humans and domestic animals. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), there were more than 7,000 cases of animal rabies reported in the United States in 2007—most of them occurring in wildlife such as raccoons, bats, and skunks.

In 2007, the CDC confirmed that canine rabies had disappeared from the U.S., but emphasized that dogs still need to be vaccinated, since exposure to infected wildlife is still possible. Domestic cats are still at risk—more than 300 cases of rabies in cats are reported every year, outnumbering canine cases three to one.

Globally, however, uncontrolled rabies in dogs still represents the largest

rabies threat. According to the World Health Organization, 10 million people a year are exposed to rabid dogs, and 55,000 people die due to that exposure.

Sept. 28 will mark the second annual World Rabies Day. Started last year by the nonprofit Alliance for Rabies Control, the goal of the day is to raise worldwide awareness of the control and prevention of rabies.

Hundreds of thousands of people—from health experts to ordinary citizens—will participate in awareness events to advocate for both human and animal populations. This “one medicine” approach is the core of the

Alliance’s message, stressing the importance of treating

all the populations at risk. It’s the only global initiative of its kind, and is supported by numerous human and animal health agencies in the public, private, and NGO sectors worldwide.

As both national and global statistics indicate, rabies awareness and prevention is necessary no matter where you live. Animal care and control agencies and shelters are on the front lines of this battle, and can be instrumental in the disease’s continuing decline. Through the distribution of pamphlets, posters, and educational handouts, individuals and organizations can help the campaign and raise awareness about this terrible, yet easily preventable disease.

For more information and educational materials, visit the World Rabies Day website at [worldrabiesday.org](http://worldrabiesday.org). AS

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