

### Most Human Rabies Treatments Avoidable

More than once every year, a number of county residents are referred by their physicians for a series of injections to protect against possible rabies infection after getting involved with a rabid or suspect rabid animal. Regrettably, many of these treatments could have been avoided if the person just took some simple precautions. While avoiding a bite from an aggressive wild or domestic animal might not always be possible, chances are good that avoiding a “non-bite” exposure is much more achievable with a little knowledge. What’s a “non-bite” exposure, you ask? Simply put, it is the contamination of any open wound, mucous membrane (think: nose, mouth, and eye) or scratch with potentially infectious material (think: saliva from a rabid animal).

Here’s an all too common scenario:

A dog being walked through the woods tangles with a raccoon (or a skunk, fox, woodchuck, etc.). The fight ends and the owner calls her dog back to her side. She then runs her fingers through the fur of her pet, examining carefully to see if it has suffered any bites or other wounds. The owner has now had direct physical contact with potentially infectious saliva from the wild animal. Maybe she has a small cut or scratch on her hand. Or, she unknowingly touches her eyes, nose or mouth with the hand that just combed through her dog’s fur.

The following day — while reviewing the incident with her veterinarian, animal control officer, or the county health department —the possibility of her having had a non-bite exposure is raised. She can’t recall all the details. Fearing the worst, she contacts her physician who immediately directs her to the Hunterdon Medical Center ER where she begins a series of vaccine injections to protect her.

But consider if she knew this before her experience:

Potentially infected saliva is inactivated after it has air dried. Had she waited long enough for any wet saliva to air dry prior to examining her pet, she would have removed all worry. Better yet, the best option is to put on a pair of gloves prior to examining a pet, and then placing the gloves aside so they can air dry. Either way, eliminating potential exposure means eliminating any need for post-exposure treatment.

But in those cases where treatment is necessary it also helps to know the truth. Indeed, there are a lot of misconceptions about the process of getting rabies injections. Yet, that process is not that terrifying. Rabies post-exposure vaccinations comprise a dose of human rabies immune globulin and four doses of rabies vaccine given on the day of the exposure, and then again on days 3, 7, and 14. The vaccine is given in a muscle, usually in the upper arm. This set of vaccinations is highly effective at preventing rabies if given as soon as possible following an exposure.

Rabies might be dangerous, and clearly, it is present in Hunterdon County. However, knowing the facts can go a long way in reducing anxieties and risks.