



County Employee Bitten by Opossum With Rabies

By ERIKA CHAVEZ

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TIMES STAFF WRITER

An opossum that bit an Orange County employee last month has tested positive for rabies, prompting health officials Tuesday to urge residents to use extreme caution when encountering any wild animal.

The incident is unusual because opossums are generally resistant to infection said Dr. Hildy Meyers, an epidemiologist for the Orange County Health Care Agency. This is the first time since record-keeping began in 1922 that an opossum in Orange County has tested positive, she said.

The county employee, who was not identified, is taking injections for rabies exposure, Meyers said.

The opossum was nesting in the engine of a county vehicle, Meyers said. The employee, suspecting an engine problem, pulled over in Laguna Hills to check under the hood. When he did so, the animal bit him.

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A friend of the man captured the opossum after the April 15 incident and took it in for testing.

The Orange County Public Health Laboratory has tested more than 7,700 wild and domestic animals for rabies since 1980, and only bats have tested positive, Meyers said. The last time a dog tested positive for rabies in the county was in 1956, and the last time a human contracted the disease here was in 1957.

Though officials consider the latest incident to be rare and isolated, animal control workers are setting traps in the area as a precaution to see if other opossums are infected, Meyers said.

From 1981 to 1997, only six opossums tested positive for rabies in California, and those were all in the northern part of the state. The disease is most common in skunks, bats

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Rabies, a viral disease transmitted by saliva, is fatal if not treated early. The virus attacks the central nervous system, causing infection of the brain.

Swift action is critical if a person is bitten by an animal, Meyers said, and fear of treatment should not keep a person from seeking immediate medical attention.

“People are under the impression that we still use the old Pasteur treatment, a series of painful shots to the abdomen that wasn’t always effective,” Meyers said. “The shots we give today are just like any other vaccine, given in the shoulder to adults and in the thigh to small children. Some people experience local pain and swelling, but it usually hurts less than a tetanus shot.”

“If someone is bitten, the first thing to do is wash the wound with soap and warm water, which can prevent infection,” Meyers said. “Then always contact your doctor, and call Animal Control.”

Meyers cautioned cat owners, especially, to vaccinate their pets against rabies, even though, unlike dog owners, they are not required by law to do so. The national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention say that more rabid cats than rabid dogs are reported every year.

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Minimizing the Rabies Risk

Here are some ways to help reduce your exposure to rabid animals:

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* Never approach or touch a wild animal

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* If you feed your pets outdoors, remove all food, water and feeding dishes immediately after the pet finishes.

* Fence your yard with material dense enough to keep most wild animals out and pets in.

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* Never leave small children unsupervised in your yard.

* Keep trash in sturdy containers with tight-fitting lids; if you must use plastic bags, set them out as late as possible on trash pickup day.

* Seal any potential entry into your house, garage or decking foundation.

* Clear brush and dense growth from your yard to discourage nesting.

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* Remove fruit that has fallen from trees.

* Call Orange County Animal Control at (714) 935-4719 to report a sick, injured or dead wild animal.

Source: Orange County Animal Control

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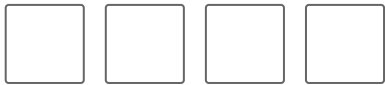
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