

Rabid kitten's diagnosis sparks widespread vaccinations

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Sixty people in the San Ramon area are undergoing rabies shots after touching a stray kitten that had the deadly disease.

This marks the first time in at least 17 years that a domestic animal has tested positive for rabies in Contra Costa County, said communicable disease program manager Sirlura Taylor.

Statewide, just two cats and one dog tested positive in 2004.

Rabies is a viral disease that is nearly 100 percent fatal when contracted.

But a series of five shots, given over a four-week period, can prevent rabies in nearly all cases if people receive the vaccine soon after exposure.

The kitten, about 3 months old when it became sick and was euthanized, was so cute people couldn't keep their hands off it.

Fewer people would have been exposed if it had been an adult cat, said veterinarian James Delano.

"Everyone loves a kitten," he said.

The kitten was picked up Oct. 11 near the intersection of Alcosta Boulevard and San Ramon Road. It was taken to a nearby home where it was kept inside as a family pet.

The following day, the family took the kitten to the Bishop Ranch Veterinary Center for a check-up. It was a little dehydrated and had worms, but otherwise seemed OK, Taylor said.

"We started vaccinating it," said veterinary hospital administrator Margaret Urquhart. "It was healthy at that time."

About a month later, the family rushed the kitten back to the veterinary center because it had a fever and wasn't acting right.

"While it was in the hospital, it started exhibiting more and more neurological signs," Urquhart said, including having difficulty walking and becoming easily agitated.

The kitten bit a staff member. Hospital employees decided to euthanize it Nov. 20 and send its brain to county health officials for an analysis.

On Nov. 23, the day before Thanksgiving, the rabies test came back positive.

People usually get rabies from the bite of an infected animal. It is spread through an animal's saliva.

Although such cases are rare, the disease also can be contracted if an animal licks scratches or open wounds, or if its saliva comes in contact with mucous membranes in the eye, mouth or nose, said Curtis Fritz, veterinarian for the state Department of Health Services.

County health officials decided 35 people at the veterinary center who touched the kitten should receive rabies shots, including Delano's 14-year-old daughter, who played with it.

Twenty-six people in the San Ramon neighborhood are also undergoing shots, Taylor said.

Finding enough vaccine for everyone's first shot became a challenge, especially since the test results came back the day before the Thanksgiving holiday.

Some hospitals have only one or two doses on hand because the shots are rarely needed and will expire.

Luckily, John Muir Medical Center had about 20 doses available and people fanned out to other area hospitals to get the shots, Taylor said.

L'oreal Northcraft, who lives near the family that housed the kitten, is upset that county officials didn't inform her about the rabies, even though her two sons played with the pet.

"There's a lot of balls that were dropped," she said. "I had to hear about this from 8-year-old kids on the playground."

Her two sons, 11-year-old Sean and 8-year-old Michael, held the kitten on Oct. 30, about two weeks before the family noticed symptoms of illness.

Fritz, the state veterinarian, said experts believe animals aren't contagious until the first symptoms occur. In rare cases, dogs shed the virus a couple of days before they become ill, he said.

Northcraft worries that the kitten's new family didn't notice the symptoms right away. Because the disease is always fatal, she believes she should have been notified so she could make the decision herself about whether her kids should get shots.

After consulting her own doctors, she took her boys to John Muir Medical Center to begin shots Thursday night. Another neighbor also started shots this week, she said.

Taylor said county officials contacted everyone on a list supplied by the kitten's new owner.

On Nov. 12, a few days before the kitten became ill, it was examined at the veterinary center and appeared to be fine, so it would not have been contagious in October, Taylor said.

But she added that anyone who had contact with the kitten in October and wants to get shots should do so. "We understand that people get really frightened," she said.

State law requires all dogs to receive rabies vaccinations, but there is no such requirement for cats. Experts recommend that all cats that are allowed outdoors be vaccinated.

Last year, 184 animals tested positive for rabies in California. Most were bats or skunks.

No one knows how the kitten contracted the disease. Taylor suspects a bat may have bitten it because bats have such small mouths that bite marks might not be visible.

Officials may know more when the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention identifies what type of rabies strain the kitten picked up

