



## **Guest Column**

**April 3, 2009**

### **What You Need to Know About Animal Bites**

Animal bites are not uncommon. In 2008, there were 229 reported bites from the areas serviced by the Galveston County Health District, which does not include bites from Galveston, Friendswood or League City since they provide their own animal services. While the most serious concern is rabies infection, the current risk of rabies in Galveston County is low with no reported cases of rabies in domestic animals since the early 1980's. Furthermore, according to state records dating back to 1950 there has not been a reported human case of rabies in Galveston County.

So, what do you do if you get bitten?

Immediately wash your wound(s) with soap and water, and then seek immediate medical attention. Your healthcare provider will evaluate your injuries and determine if you need to receive shots to prevent rabies. While most animal bites do not require preventive rabies shots, a medical evaluation is important because human rabies, while rare, is nearly always fatal. In addition, your healthcare provider will also determine if you need a tetanus shot or antibiotics.

There are two types of shots, referred to as rabies prophylaxis, that MAY be recommended if the circumstances of your bite puts you at high risk. Post bite medication consists of a regimen of one dose of immune globulin and five doses of rabies vaccine over the course of one month. Receiving rabies medication requires several follow-up visits over one month; treatments are costly if not covered by insurance – typically greater than \$2,000 - but can be more or less depending on weight; and often these medications are limited in supply and/or difficult to find. Thus, only high risk bites are recommended for prophylaxis.

Whether or not you are recommended to receive rabies prophylaxis depends on several factors, including: (1) whether or not the animal bite was provoked - any animal may bite if threatened or provoked, (2) whether or not rabies is present in the county, (3) whether or not the animal was showing signs of rabies which include aggression, excessive drooling, difficulty swallowing, staggering, and seizures, (4) whether or not the animal is available for quarantine and observation.

GCHD has a veterinary consultant, Dr. Dana Beckham, who can assist healthcare providers and citizens in assessing animal bites and determining the best course of action regarding rabies. She can be reached at (409) 938-2322. In addition, she can assist with procedures for locating and administering rabies prophylaxis. It is important that the assessment is done in a timely manner to determine if shots are needed. In most cases of dog and cat bites, it is acceptable to withhold medication for up to 72 hours while awaiting rabies test results or making efforts to locate the biting animal for testing or quarantine. Information on bite risk and when to administer medications can be found on the GCHD web site at [www.gchd.org/epidemiology/rabiesPostexposureProphylaxis.pdf](http://www.gchd.org/epidemiology/rabiesPostexposureProphylaxis.pdf).

Equally important to seeking medical attention is notifying your local animal control agency. Citizens in Hitchcock, Dickinson, La Marque, Santa Fe, Bayou Vista, Tiki Island, Texas City, Clear Lake Shores, Kemah and unincorporated areas of Galveston County should call the Joe Vickery Animal Shelter at (409) 948-2485 to report bites. Galveston residents should call (409) 765-3702, League City residents should call (281) 554-1377, and Friendswood residents should call (281) 996-3391

Finally, doing all you can to prevent animal bites is the best approach. Here are some basic safety precautions you can follow and teach children to avoid bites: don't go near strange dogs; don't surprise or tease a dog that is sleeping, eating, playing with a toy, or caring for puppies; walk up to a dog from the side, not from the back or directly from the front; if a dog act as if it might bite, stand still, and don't scream or run; if a dog attacks, protect yourself with anything you have – backpack, purse, jacket or bicycle. If you are knocked down try to lie face down or curl up in a ball with your hands over your ears and be still and quiet until the dog goes away.

I hope this information helps prevent animal bites but it is important to remember it is up to people, not animals, to stop bites. Responsible pet ownership goes a long way in preventing these injuries in our community.

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*(News Media: For more information contact Kurt Koopmann, GCHD Public Information Officer, (409) 938-2211)*