June 14, 2016

Alabama observes Rabies Awareness and Bite Prevention Week

MOBILE, Alabama — The Alabama Department of Public Health has designated June 13-17, 2016, as Rabies Awareness and Dog Bite Prevention Week. This is a time to remind the public that Alabama law requires all dogs, cats and ferrets to be currently vaccinated against rabies and that most animal bites can be prevented.

Rabies is a disease of all mammals, including man, and is always considered to be fatal unless preventative treatment is given following the exposure. The primary means of exposure is through a bite or scratch with contaminated saliva from the animal. Transmission of the deadly virus also can occur if saliva contacts the mucous membranes of the eye or mouth.

Rabies shots for dogs, cats and ferrets are available during weekend clinics. The next one is this Saturday from 12:30 to 2:30 p.m. at the City of Mobile Animal Shelter at 855 Owens Street. The cost is $10, and is payable in cash.

Vaccination of domestic dogs, cats and ferrets not only protects the animals against rabies, but also minimizes human risk by reducing rabies in domesticated animals. Each month, the Mobile County Health Department’s Rabies Officer provides hundreds of residents with low-cost vaccines for their pet dogs, cats and ferrets at a variety of locations. From May 2015 through April 2016, the MCHD Rabies Officer has administered 1,810 pets with rabies vaccines.

Dr. Dee W. Jones, the State Public Health Veterinarian, notes that in many areas of Alabama, rabies in wildlife species, particularly raccoons, is on the rise and spreading to areas previously thought to not have the infection. “Increases in wildlife rabies increases the risks that people’s pets can be exposed, and coupled with low vaccination rates in domestic animals, is a recipe for increased rabies transmissions,” he said.

Hundreds of thousands of Americans seek medical attention for animal bites each year — many of those bitten are children. “Animals of any breed can bite on occasion, especially if provoked or startled,” said Dr. Jones. “It is important to always use caution when approaching strange animals, and never attempt to pet a stray or injured animal.”

The Alabama Department of Public Health recommends that if you get an animal bite or scratch, wash the wound thoroughly under running water, immediately seek medical attention from your doctor or a hospital, and report the incident to your county health department for follow-up. Additionally, using the following protective measures can help avoid exposure to the rabies virus:

- Avoid domestic and wild animals that are acting in a strange or unusual manner.
- Teach children to stay away from animals that are hurt or unknown to them.
- Instruct children to avoid approaching any wild animal, whether or not it is acting strangely.
- Advise children to tell an adult if they are bitten or scratched by an animal.

For more information about rabies, bite prevention or contact information for the Rabies Officer, please contact the Mobile County Health Department at 251-690-8868 or the Alabama Department of Public Health’s Division of Epidemiology at 800-338-8374 or 334-206-5971.