



THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES



Community Cats and Rabies

When it comes to managing community cats, it's important to understand the concerns of public health officials. Whether or not animal control is a function of the health department, the support or opposition of public health officials may be critical to implementing community-wide Trap/Neuter/Return (TNR) and other community cat programs. Public Health departments protect human health by addressing zoonotic animal diseases, which can pass from animals to people.

Rabies in the United States

Rabies is a virus that infects the central nervous system and is typically contracted from the bite of an infected animal. Untreated, it is nearly always fatal. With proper treatment through post exposure prophylaxis (PEP) it can be prevented. Approximately 40,000 people undergo PEP treatment per year due to a potential rabies exposure*. All warm-blooded animals can contract rabies. Currently, the majority of rabies (90% of reported cases*) in the United States occurs in wildlife, thanks to successful vaccination programs for cats and dogs. However, most people are potentially exposed to rabies as a result of exposure to domestic animals*. Vaccinating community cats against rabies not only protect cats, it stops potential transmission to human and other pet populations.

Cats and Rabies

Community cats may be feral (unsocialized) or stray (lost or abandoned pet cats). Because feral cats are afraid of and avoid people, it's unlikely they would attack a person or allow a person to get near enough to be injured. However people who are concerned about the welfare of community cats or want to rid themselves of community cats may attempt to handle the cats and could be bitten.

Owned pet cats who are allowed to roam and stray pet cats are more likely to allow a person to approach. A rabid cat, whether feral or friendly, will behave unpredictably.

Reducing the Risk of Rabies

Vaccinations have been the best barrier to the spread of rabies. Animal control and vaccination programs begun in the 1940's virtually eliminated domestic dogs as reservoirs of rabies in the United States. Other counties have been and are implementing robust vaccination programs to address the disease.

Most cases of rabies in cats come from areas (such as the Northeast) where there are large populations of common rabies vector species. Raccoons, as well as skunks, foxes and bats, are vector species, which means they have been identified as the most common carriers of rabies, and can pass the virus onto cats.

Oral bait programs for wildlife populations have been used to help prevent spread of the disease into new areas. Research has recently shown that cats vaccinated with a single dose of rabies vaccine were protected 4 years later in challenge studies using virulent rabies virus. The single most important thing you can do to reduce the risk of rabies is to have your companion animals vaccinated against the disease. If you are a community cat caretaker, it is very important to vaccinate the cats you care for against rabies.



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Community Cat Management and Rabies Prevention

Whereas rabies vaccinations are mandatory for dogs, many communities don't require rabies vaccination for cats. As owners of pet cats should obtain rabies vaccinations for their companions, so should caretakers of community cats. For community cats, the best time to get them vaccinated is during their sterilization procedure. Spay/neuter clinics and veterinary practices can give vaccinations while cats are sedated to avoid extra handling of fearful cats. Subsidized spay/neuter services are available to cat caretakers in many communities. Services must not only be affordable, they must also be accessible to underserved communities.

Vaccinating community cats against rabies and reducing their numbers through spay/neutering can limit human exposure to rabies. Trap/neuter/vaccinate/return (TNVR) best practice includes spay/neutering and vaccinating cats against rabies, and therefore should be supported as a preventive measure for the spread of rabies. TNVR programs should use rabies vaccinations labeled for at least 3 years duration of immunity and people who feed community cats or their pet cats outdoors should use feeding strategies that decrease attracting wildlife.

Studies have shown that community cats have excellent immune responses when vaccinated once at the time of sterilization surgery; a single rabies vaccination protected cats challenged to the disease for more than 4 years; a single dose of Intervet Continuum vaccine given at 12 weeks of age protected cats challenged at 50 months; and feral cats have adequate antibody titers quickly (approximately 3-1/2 weeks) after being vaccinated at the time of surgery.

TNVR is additionally beneficial for rabies prevention because through spaying and neutering, it stops the birth of kittens. Because kittens young enough to be socialized (tamed) and stray pet cats are ideally removed from the environment for adoption, depending on the resources available at the local animal care organizations, there can be an immediate reduction in the number of community cats.

Even when community cats are vaccinated against rabies, public health officials are concerned that revaccinating them will not be possible. Since the lifespan of feral cats is typically much shorter than pet cats, a vaccine with 3-year immunity may be reasonable and is certainly better than no vaccine at all. Efforts should be made by caretakers to re-trap and vaccinate any community cats as they are able.

Resources and Citations

*Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, www.cdc.gov/Features/dsRabies/
Pets for Life Community Outreach Toolkit, humanesociety.org/pfl-toolkit

Contact The Humane Society of the United States at cats@humanesociety.org for additional information and resources.