

Rabies and Wildlife Pets

In the interest of public health and safety, Florida Statutes 381 and Florida Administrative Code 64D-3 require that all persons with knowledge of human exposure to a suspect rabid animal report the incident to the county health department. Certain species kept as pets are considered suspect rabid animals. Permittees keeping species at high risk of transmitting rabies involved in bite/scratch exposure incidents must be prepared to surrender the animal to county health department or animal control authorities for euthanasia and rabies testing upon demand.

Of all the high-risk species, the raccoon is the most important wildlife rabies host in Florida. During the past one-half century at one time or another, cases of rabies in these animals have been reported from every county. Currently, the entire state is considered to be at risk for rabies. All raccoons, even those kept as personal pets, regardless of their origin or vaccination status, are considered at high risk for rabies.

Whenever wildlife pets such as a raccoon bites, scratches or otherwise exposes a person to saliva, there is the possibility that the animal could be infected with rabies virus. Research has shown that raccoons can shed rabies virus in their saliva without showing any signs or symptoms of the disease.¹ In order to define whether the person involved in the incident was exposed to a rabid animal, it will be necessary to euthanize the animal and test its brain for the presence of rabies virus.

¹ Burrige MJ, Sawyer LA, Bigler WJ. Rabies in Florida. HRS, 1986.