

World Rabies Day 2008

[Announcer] This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC – Safer, Healthier People.

[Paul Reid] Hi. I'm Paul Reid. Welcome to this CDC podcast on rabies. Each year, more than 55,000 people die from rabies worldwide; that's almost one person every ten minutes. The CDC reports that supplies of human rabies vaccine in the U.S. are limited. With us today is Dr. Charles Rupprecht, Chief of the CDC's Rabies Program. He's here to help us understand more about this situation. Welcome, Dr. Rupprecht.

[Dr. Rupprecht] Thank you, Paul.

[Paul Reid] Let's start with the current situation in the United States. How big is the issue of rabies in the U.S.?

[Dr. Rupprecht] Annually, between seven and ten thousand rabid animals are diagnosed in the United States. Usually, these are wild animals, such as skunks, raccoons, foxes, and bats. There's just as many rabid animals in the United States today as when I was a child. It's just that it's changed. People in developing countries are faced with rabid dogs as we were in the United States. We've been able to control that disease in dogs, and now, by focusing upon rabies in the wild, among wild animals, we're able to diagnose cases among raccoons, skunks, foxes, and bats.

[Paul Reid] Interesting. I understand that the human rabies vaccine supplies in the U.S. are currently limited. Now what does that mean to the average American?

[Dr. Rupprecht] The current supply limitations that we have with human rabies vaccines in the United States shouldn't be a concern to the average American. We've had no documented deaths due to rabies because of these supply limitations, and no one who is exposed to a rabid animal is going without vaccine today. These supply limitations are rather focused upon preventing any human rabies cases. So the average person should not be concerned.

[Paul Reid] Now is this considered a shortage?

[Dr. Rupprecht] This is a very important term. It's a subtle, but important distinction. Supplies are limited, but we have no shortage. A shortage would entail concern to the average citizen, such that if they were exposed to a rabid animal there may be inadequate supplies to prevent a human rabies case. That's not the situation. We have adequate supplies to ensure that anyone who is exposed to a rabid animal will receive vaccine. There are some limitations, however. Individuals who may be traveling, and in the past may have been able to receive rabies vaccination, will not be able to receive that product now. And similarly, there are some important first responders - diagnosticians, animal handlers, and individuals whose job it is to try and minimize the impact of rabies on everyday life. These individuals who should be receiving rabies vaccine are on hold until such time that supplies improve.

[Paul Reid] Now is there anything that people can do to help themselves deal with the limited supply?

[Dr. Rupprecht] That's an excellent question. People can avoid being exposed. That is, in regards to pets, love your own animals; leave others alone. Make sure they receive regular veterinary visits and they're up to date on their rabies vaccinations. And importantly, in regards to strange-acting, stray animals or wildlife—please don't touch them. People can keep part of the solution by not becoming part of the problem. Meaning by not being exposed you maintain vaccine supplies for other individuals who are bitten by rabid animals.

[Paul Reid] Well now, let's shift focus for a moment and discuss the rabies situation globally. With an estimated 55,000 deaths cause by rabies each year, it seems that this is a significant problem around the world. Can you comment on the worldwide situation?

[Dr. Rupprecht] Globally, rabies is a significant everyday factor in most developing countries. Dogs are a major global reservoir—that is the major hosts for which most people are exposed. Luckily, we have been able to eliminate rabies among dogs in developed countries and significantly increasingly in developing countries, such as in Latin America and Mexico. The opportunity to vaccinate large numbers of dogs with safe and inexpensive vaccines has really been a major public health milestone.

[Paul Reid] I understand there is a rabies management plan for North America. Tell us about the plan and how it will be utilized.

[Dr. Rupprecht] For many years, individuals involved in rabies prevention and control from Canada, the United States, and Mexico have been meeting to discuss common opportunities and challenges because we recognize that diseases don't respect international boundaries. For example, we have a common issue along the border between the United States and Mexico concerning rabies in dogs and in coyotes. Similarly, there are oral vaccination efforts that go on between individuals in Canada and the United States focused upon rabies in red foxes and increasingly now in skunks. So we recognize, being good neighbors, that we not only give problems to each other, but increasingly have to be involved in solutions to those public health and wildlife issues. The North American Rabies Management Plan is a continental basis, a plan for the future for cooperation to not only study rabies, but significantly to prevent its introduction from one country into another, and to control, through common strategies, rabies within our own borders.

[Paul Reid] Where can listeners go to get more information about World Rabies Day or these global initiatives?

[Dr. Rupprecht] Listeners can get more information at www.worldrabiesday.org.

[Paul Reid] Thank you, Dr. Rupprecht. For more information on rabies, please visit www.cdc.gov/rabies.

[Announcer] For the most accurate health information, please visit www.cdc.gov, or visit or call 1-800-CDC-INFO, 24-7.