

Health Alerts

Health Update #172 - Canine Distemper in NYS Wildlife - May 4, 2006

The Wadsworth Center Rabies Laboratory has identified Canine Distemper Virus as the cause of death in a number of skunks, raccoons and some other wildlife in the Capital Region.

The Wildlife Pathology Unit of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation submitted 6 raccoons and a skunk to New York State Department of Health - Wadsworth Laboratories for rabies testing. All 7 animals were from Albany County and the animals had exhibited neurologic signs. All 7 were negative for rabies but positive for Canine Distemper virus.

There were also reports of possible Canine Distemper in skunks and raccoons in New York City, but those animals were not specifically tested for the virus. All New York City Animals were neurologic and tested negative for rabies.

While Canine Distemper is not a human health concern, the virus does cause illness and death in wildlife that might be mistaken for rabies. The presence of distemper in wildlife also poses a potential risk of infection to dogs if those dogs have direct contact with infected wildlife. There is a vaccine for dogs available through veterinarians.

The NYS Department of Agriculture and Markets (NYSDAM) has sent out a notice to veterinarians in NYS alerting them of the recent findings.

If public health departments or other agencies receive inquiries from the public about distemper, some important points to remember are:

- Canine Distemper Virus does not affect humans
- A vaccine against this virus is available for dogs
- Pet owners with concerns about their pets' health should contact their veterinarians
- Distemper is just one more reason why pet owners should minimize their pets' exposure to wildlife and especially should not allow their pets to roam unattended.

Local health departments have been advised that there is no need to do anything differently regarding response to potential rabies incidents and handling of animal specimens for rabies testing. Potential rabies exposures should be handled as usual.

If you have any questions about rabies incidents and exposures, please contact the NYSDOH Zoonoses Program at 518-474-3186. For additional information on the NYSDAM Distemper notice, please contact the Agriculture Department at 518-457-3502.