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FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH URGES RESIDENTS TO AVOID CONTACT WITH WILD AND STRAY ANIMALS



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Okeechobee, Fla. — The Florida Department of Health in Okeechobee County (FDOH-Okeechobee) urges residents to avoid contact with wild and stray animals to protect themselves from the risk of rabies exposure. In Florida, raccoons, bats and foxes, and unvaccinated cats are the animals most frequently diagnosed with rabies. Other animals that are at high risk for rabies include skunks, otters, coyotes, bobcats, and stray or unvaccinated dogs and ferrets. Each year, Okeechobee County receives reports of rabid animals. In 2021/2022, three rabid animals, including a dog, a cat, and a raccoon, were reported near Okeechobee County. Most recently, one suspicious skunk with exposure to several humans, was reported in the North-West area of Okeechobee County in January 2022.

“Rabies is a potentially fatal disease. It is important not to handle wild animals, to be aware of unusual acting animals, and to keep pets vaccinated against rabies,” said Bret A. Smith, County Health Officer.

Rabies is transmitted through exposure to the saliva and nervous tissue from a rabid animal through a bite, scratch, or contact with mucous membranes such as the eyes, nose, or mouth. FDOH-Okeechobee County works with Okeechobee Animal Control Services and FWC in responding to incidents of animal bites, testing animals for rabies through the Bureau of Public Health State Laboratory, and quarantines animals as necessary.

FDOH-Okeechobee County also provides rabies vaccinations to victims of animal bites, the only known effective treatment for rabies prevention in humans.

The following are steps you can take to protect yourself and your loved ones against rabies:

- Keep rabies vaccinations up to date for all pets.
- Keep your pets under direct supervision so they do not come in contact with wild animals. If your pet is bitten by a wild animal, seek veterinary assistance for the animal immediately and contact local Animal Control Services at:
Okeechobee County Animal Control (863) 357-3225 M-F 8:00 a.m.- 5:00 p.m. or (863) 763-3117 after hours/weekends.
- Call your local animal control agency to remove any stray animals from your neighborhood.

- Spay or neuter your pets to help reduce the number of unwanted pets that may not be properly cared for or regularly vaccinated.
- **Do not** handle, feed, or unintentionally attract wild animals with open garbage cans or litter.
- **Never** adopt wild animals or bring them into your home.
- Teach children to **never** handle unfamiliar animals, wild or domestic, even if they appear friendly.
- Prevent bats from entering living quarters or occupied spaces in homes, churches, schools, and other similar areas, where they might come in contact with people and pets.

Unusual acting animals should be reported to local Animal Control Services for handling. Anyone who is bitten or scratched by wild animals or strays should report the incident to their doctor immediately, as well as the Florida Department of Health in the county in which they reside, and local Animal Control Services.

Okeechobee County Animal Control (863) 357-3225

For further information on rabies, go to <http://www.floridahealth.gov/diseases-andconditions/rabies/index.html>.

The Department works to protect, promote and improve the health of all people in Florida through integrated state, county and community efforts. For more information, please contact FDOH- Okeechobee's Epidemiology Division at (863) 462-5800 or the Environmental Health Division at (863) 462-5800.

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About the Florida Department of Health

The department, nationally accredited by the [Public Health Accreditation Board](#), works to protect, promote and improve the health of all people in Florida through integrated state, county and community efforts.

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