

NEWS RELEASE
St. Mary's County Health Department

www.smchd.org

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**MILD WEATHER IS ON THE WAY: GET SMART NOW TO PROTECT YOUR PETS
AND FAMILIES FROM RABIES**

(LEONARDTOWN, MD) April 11, 2007 – With mild weather just around the corner, St. Mary's County Health Department is reminding residents about the dangers of rabies, and encouraging pet owners in particular to take measures that will protect their animals from exposure to this potentially deadly disease.

The number one thing we emphasize is checking your pet's vaccination records and making sure their immunization against rabies is up to date," said Ann Rose, environmental health sanitarian for the health department. Pets provide a line of defense for humans because pets are most likely to be in contact with a wild animal carrying the disease. According to Rose, a vaccinated pet will still have to be quarantined for 45 days if they have contact with an animal positively identified with or suspected of having rabies, but the pet is unlikely to show symptoms, and the precaution is generally accepted as adequate protection for humans.

Unvaccinated pets that come in contact with a suspected or positively identified rabid animal are subject to a strict double-enclosure isolation for 6 months. According to the health department, many pet owners choose to have the pet euthanized rather than face the longer isolation.

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Rabies is spread through the saliva of an infected animal. Allowing pets to roam unsupervised, and approaching unknown animals, including domesticated pets, increases the likelihood of coming into contact with saliva that could spread the disease. Owners caring for their pet after contact with a possibly rabid animal are warned that the rabies virus may persist in traces of saliva for up to two hours. As a precaution, pet owners should avoid direct contact with saliva from a possibly rabid animal which may be found on a pet's fur.

Animals that display unusual or aggressive behavior may pose the threat of rabies and should be reported immediately to animal control. In addition, health department officials advise that reporting a bite or scratch by any animal is a wise and necessary move to protect the health and safety of not only your pet and family, but your neighbors as well.

Two positive cases of Rabies were confirmed in St. Mary's County in March. One case was located in the town of Leonardtown and the other near Friendship School Road. Both incidents involved skunks that had come in contact with dogs. One dog was quarantined for 45 days, the other voluntarily euthanized by the owner because it was not vaccinated.

"Regardless of the circumstances, the decision by an owner to euthanize a pet may be difficult but sometimes necessary in the interests of the health of the pet and pet owners," Rose said.

"These recent cases show again the significance of keeping animals currently vaccinated against rabies."

Through a partnership with the St. Mary's Animal Welfare League, low cost vaccination clinics

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are held the second Monday of each month from 6 – 8 p.m. through November 2007 near the 4-H Building at the St. Mary's County Fairgrounds in Leonardtown. The cost is \$10 per shot. For more information call 301-373-5659 or visit the website at www.smawl.org.

Bites and scratches by any animal should be reported to the St. Mary's County Sheriff's Office at 301-475-8008.

For more information about rabies and rabies prevention, please visit our website at www.smchd.org or call the health department at 301-475-4321.

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