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## The Virtual Gardener—Rabies in Arizona

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The Arizona Department of Health Services (ADHS) recently released some alarming statistics about the number of animals that tested positive for rabies in the state last year—280, the largest number on record. This was up by 59 percent from the 176 reported in 2008. In Cochise County the jump was from 12 cases in 2008 to 39 cases in 2009—a 225 percent increase.

Over the past decade the numbers have gone up and down but generally increased, possibly reflecting the increased human population of the state, the number of wild animal traps deployed, and other factors as well as the number of animals actually infected. Annual statistics are available on the ADHS website ([http://tiny.cc/ADHS\\_rabies](http://tiny.cc/ADHS_rabies)) for the years from 1999 to 2009. According to the ADHS more than 90 percent of the cases of rabies occur in wild animals, especially bats, skunks, and foxes. Rodents such as rats, mice, and squirrels are less likely to become infected. Among domesticated animals, cats, cattle, and dogs are the ones most often reported with rabies. The good news is that the last reported case of rabies in a human in Arizona was in 1981.

The increase in rabies cases could not come at a worse time for Arizona. Because of budget cuts, the ADHS laboratories in Tucson and Flagstaff have been closed, throwing an extra burden on the Arizona State Health Laboratory in Phoenix, the only remaining lab in the state that does rabies testing. To make matters even worse, the State Public Health Veterinarian left in June 2009 to take a position in Colorado leaving an important vacancy in the state rabies response team which will not be filled. As a result, new policies for testing have been instituted. Even when people are bitten, pets will not be tested unless they exhibit clear symptoms of rabies or there are other special circumstances. Wild animals will not be tested unless there has been an exposure of humans, pets, or livestock (see [http://tiny.cc/submissions\\_policy](http://tiny.cc/submissions_policy) for details).

Given the increase in the number of rabid animals identified in Cochise County, our risk of becoming infected is greater. So what should we as gardeners and others who spend time out of doors know about rabies? The first thing to know is that some rabies symptoms may be extremely slow to appear after exposure, but once neurological symptoms have appeared the disease is almost always fatal—only three people are known to have survived from this stage of the disease. For this reason every exposure must be taken seriously and immediate medical attention sought. Treatment with rabies vaccine is almost always successful if started within ten days of exposure.

Most of us know enough to avoid handling wild animals at all and to distance ourselves from any animal exhibiting unusual behavior. Most infected animals go through three stages of the disease. In the first (*prodromal*) stage there are often major behavioral changes such as a shy animal becoming friendly, an aggressive animal becoming shy, or a normally nocturnal animal such as a skunk

appearing in daylight. Wild animals that appear to be very friendly or tame should be regarded with suspicion and contact with them avoided. In the second, (*furious*) stage infected animals may become vicious and attack without provocation. And finally in the third and last (*paralytic*) stage, they may lose control of limbs, have difficulty breathing, and salivate excessively. Death usually follows rapidly due to respiratory failure. Exposure to rabies from bats is often not so easily detected. Many people who have contracted the disease after being bitten by a rabid bat were unaware of being bitten because of the small size of the wound. Any physical contact with a bat should be taken seriously. Even the presence of a bat in a room with an infant is considered to be presumptive evidence of exposure to rabies. Infection occurs when the saliva of an infected animal gets into a wound (usually from a bite) but infection can also result from the saliva getting into the eyes, nose, or mouth. If infection of a human is suspected you should:

- ◆ Immediately wash the wound with soap and water.
- ◆ Try to capture the animal if that is possible without risking further wounds but take care not to damage the head.
- ◆ Notify animal control. If the animal is a pet it will be quarantined for observation. If it was a wild animal, it will be presumed to have been rabid until testing proves otherwise.
- ◆ Notify the local health department and see a doctor for further instructions.

If your pet has been bitten, consult your veterinarian and notify local animal control immediately. If you are interested in learning more, check out these websites:

American Veterinary Medical Association—<http://tiny.cc/avma>

National Institutes of Health—[http://tiny.cc/nih\\_rabies](http://tiny.cc/nih_rabies)

World Health Organization—[http://tiny.cc/who\\_rabies](http://tiny.cc/who_rabies)

Center for Disease Control Advice for Travelers—[http://tiny.cc/CDC\\_rabies](http://tiny.cc/CDC_rabies)