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Kentucky Department for Public Health Reports Human Death from Rabies

FRANKFORT, Ky. (Dec. 27, 2024) – Today, Kentucky health officials announced a human death from rabies in a Northern Kentucky resident. The source of the individual’s rabies exposure has not been identified at this time and may have occurred outside of the U.S. during international travel. The individual received medical treatment in Kentucky and Ohio, therefore the Kentucky Department for Public Health (KDPH) is working with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Northern Kentucky Health Department and Ohio Department of Health on the investigation of this case.

“Rabies is a rare but serious disease caused by a virus that infects the brain,” said KDPH Commissioner Dr. Steven Stack. “Unfortunately, if left untreated rabies is usually fatal. Immediate medical care after a suspected exposure to rabies is critical, as rabies treatment called post-exposure prophylaxis, or PEP, is nearly 100% effective at preventing rabies.”

Human to human transmission of rabies is rare, but as a precaution health officials are working together to ensure that people who have been in contact with the individual are assessed for possible exposure to rabies and receive medical treatment, as appropriate.

Rabies is typically spread through bites and scratches from an infected animal, or from infected saliva or mucus entering the eyes, nose, mouth or open wounds. To reduce the risk of exposure to rabies virus, it is important to keep pets up to date on rabies vaccinations and to avoid contact with wild animals. In Kentucky, the most common carriers of rabies are bats and skunks. However, any mammal can be infected with the rabies virus.

Talk to a healthcare provider immediately if you think you may have been bitten or scratched by a wild animal, particularly sick-acting animals.

Rabies infections in humans are very rare due to routine vaccination of pets and other wildlife control efforts in the U.S. The last Kentucky resident with confirmed rabies infection was in 1996.

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