

NYC Squirrel is Attacking People. Is it Rabid or Just Nuts?



By Julianna LeMieux — July 27, 2017



A grey squirrel [1]

A walk through Brooklyn's Prospect Park this summer may not be as relaxing as it sounds.

At least five people are known to have been attacked by a squirrel between July 18th and July 20th. Oddly, the squirrel attacks are reported as being unprovoked. This is not the case of mistaking a finger for a peanut. The squirrel attacked people (in one case, jumped up on a seven-year-old child) as they walked or jogged by.

Although it is not clear what is going on with the squirrel, or why it's biting people, the NYC Health Department has put out a warning that it may be rabid and that people who have been bitten should seek medical immediately for rabies post-exposure prophylaxis. This recommendation makes sense, given that rabies is nearly 100% fatal when contracted.

But, how likely is it that the squirrel is rabid?

Luckily - it is very unlikely. Squirrels do not fall under the category of animals that typically carry rabies. Most cases of rabies occur in skunks, raccoons, bats, coyotes, and foxes. That said, it is possible that a squirrel could acquire rabies. Many different types of mammals can get rabies (other animals like birds and insects cannot). Rabies sometimes does occur in dogs and cattle - not as commonly in horses, goats, sheep, swine, and ferrets.

New York State started monitoring rabies cases 25 years ago and, to date, has not identified a squirrel with rabies. On top of that, there are no known cases of transmission of rabies from a squirrel to a human in the United States.

However, the possibility exists that this unusually aggressive squirrel is the first - it did attack and

bite five people after all. That's not your average, super normal squirrel. The squirrel is still on the loose (or it's dead). It would be extremely useful to catch the squirrel, dead or alive, as the only way to tell if the squirrel is infected with rabies or not is to euthanize it and analyze its brain. Without the squirrel in hand, it is impossible to know if it has rabies or not.

Rabies is caused by a virus that is secreted in the saliva of an infected animal and is transmitted through a bite. The virus attacks the nervous system and once symptoms appear, the end result is almost always death.

Because the infection is so devastating, it is right to hurry in to get rabies treatment that will prevent the disease after a bite. The shot is a one-two punch that includes both the vaccine (which people other than veterinarians do not typically get) and a shot of antibody to the virus. The vaccine will induce a lasting protective response of the immune system. The antibody will immediately take care of any virus that may have entered through the initial bite from the animal. It is a series of four shots, given on the day of the exposure, and then again on days 3, 7, and 14. Together, the shots are an incredibly effective way to prevent any virus that may have entered from the animal in getting to the nervous system and killing the bite victim.

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