

The Farmers' Chronicles

BLOG

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Rabies Does not Take a Break, Neither Should We This September

Every ten minutes, somewhere in the world, a person loses their life to rabies. Behind these numbers are real stories, children who leave this world too soon, parents who never get the chance to watch their children grow, and families whose lives are shattered in an instant. What makes this tragedy even more devastating is that rabies is entirely preventable. With the right awareness, timely action, and community commitment, no one should die from this disease.

September, recognised globally as Rabies Awareness Month, and World Rabies Day on 28 September, is a time for us to reflect, educate and act with urgency. Rabies is not a distant threat; it is a present danger that has plagued humanity for centuries. Globally, nearly 59 000 people die from rabies every year, with children under the age of fifteen accounting for about 40% of these deaths. The hardest hit are communities in rural areas of Africa and Asia, where access to vaccines, medical care and life-saving treatment is scarce.

In these areas, families often face heartbreaking choices: to seek treatment many hours away, or to stay at home in hope, hope that too often ends in grief.

Each statistic represents a preventable loss, and each life lost is a reminder that our efforts to eliminate rabies must continue with greater urgency. Rabies occurs in all nine provinces of South Africa and is endemic due to infected wildlife. Dog rabies poses a particularly high risk in parts of KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern Cape and Limpopo, as well as along the Free State and Lesotho border. In South Africa, up to two-thirds of human rabies cases occur in children under 18 years of age, with the vast majority caused by rabid dogs.

This underscores the importance of vaccinating dogs against rabies so they cannot spread the disease to our children. The disease itself is as merciless as it is preventable. Rabies is a viral infection that attacks the brain and nervous system, progressing silently after infection until it manifests with symptoms such as fever, anxiety, confusion, and eventually paralysis and death. Once symptoms appear, survival is virtually impossible.

The virus spreads most often through the saliva of infected animals, primarily dogs, when they bite or scratch a person.



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It can also enter through open wounds or mucous membranes, such as the eyes, nose or mouth. Simply touching an animal does not spread the virus, but a single bite from an unvaccinated, infected dog or cat can change the course of a life forever. The tragedy of rabies is that prevention is straightforward. Vaccinating dogs and cats is the most effective measure, especially because we live so closely with them. A vaccinated dog is more than just a beloved companion, it becomes a shield for the family, the neighbourhood and the wider community.

In regions where community vaccination drives are embraced, rabies rates drop dramatically. Responsible pet ownership, including routine vaccination and proper care, is not just about protecting animals; it is about safeguarding human lives. Teaching children to avoid stray or unfamiliar animals is another crucial step, as they are the most frequent victims due to their natural curiosity and playfulness.

Any mammal, including humans, can become infected with rabies. In South Africa, most human rabies cases are caused by rabid dogs, but wildlife (such as jackals, foxes and mongooses), livestock, cats, and even cape fur seals, can also transmit the virus. Because rabies affects the brain, it leads to behavioural changes and neurological symptoms. Some animals may become unusually aggressive, while others appear uncharacteristically tame or “dumb”. Other signs include drooling or excessive salivation, strange vocalisations, tremors or seizures, abnormal movements and paralysis.

If you suspect that an animal may have rabies, report it immediately to your local state veterinary office, a private veterinarian, a welfare organisation, or the police.

Despite preventive measures, bites and scratches still happen, and what follows can mean the difference between life and death. Washing the wound immediately and thoroughly with soap and running water for at least ten minutes can drastically reduce the risk of infection. The next critical step is seeking medical care without delay. Health professionals can assess the risk and provide post-exposure prophylaxis, a series of vaccines that stop the virus before it spreads. In some cases, rabies immunoglobulin, a life-saving injection into the wound, may also be required.

Waiting for symptoms is never an option; once rabies reaches the nervous system, it is too late for treatment. This year's theme, “Act Now: You, Me, Community”, speaks to the heart of the fight against rabies. The message is clear: rabies is not one person's problem; it is everyone's responsibility. Individuals must vaccinate their pets and raise awareness. Communities must come together to organise and support vaccination campaigns.

Leaders and policymakers must prioritise access to vaccines and resources, particularly in rural and underserved areas. Rabies elimination requires collective effort, and when communities, governments and partners work together, the dream of a rabies-free world becomes achievable. In our daily lives, small actions can make an enormous impact. Checking your pets' vaccination records, encouraging neighbours to do the same, supporting awareness events, and sharing knowledge on social media are simple yet powerful steps.

Every action brings us closer to the global goal of eliminating human deaths from dog-mediated rabies by 2030. This is not an impossible dream, it is a target within reach, but only if we all commit to playing our part.



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Rabies deaths are not abstract numbers; they are preventable tragedies that leave lasting scars on families and communities. They are children whose laughter is silenced, parents who are mourned, and futures that are cut short. This September, let us pledge to break the cycle of loss. Let us honour those who have been taken too soon by ensuring no one else suffers the same fate.

Together, we can make rabies a disease of the past. The National Department of Agriculture urges every pet owner to vaccinate their pets against rabies. Visit your local veterinary clinic and look out for vaccination drives near you. With shared commitment and action, we can achieve a human rabies-free South Africa by 2030.

-Prince Mtsweni-

