

Canine Distemper and Wildlife

Canine distemper, a common viral disease of domestic dogs, is also a common disease in some wild animals in East Tennessee. Raccoons with distemper are the species most frequently seen at the University of Tennessee Veterinary Teaching Hospital, but foxes and skunks are also susceptible to distemper. Distemper can occur at any time of the year, but late fall and early winter are the times when most cases are seen. This is probably because the wild populations become stressed by limited food availability and weather. Outbreaks, a high number of cases at one time of year, occur every few years in our local raccoon population.

Animals with distemper may have discharges from the eyes and nose (watery eyes and nose or pus coming from the eyes or nose). They may also sneeze, cough, or have diarrhea. Many animals come to us because they have nervous system signs, such as trembling (shivering like they are cold), incoordination (stumbling, falling down, having difficulty getting up again), circling, or convulsions. Unfortunately, it is not possible to distinguish the nervous system signs of distemper from those caused by the rabies virus. Consequently, the general public should not try to help or handle these animals. Distemper is almost always fatal in these wild animals. Any wild animal showing nervous system signs should be considered rabid (until proven otherwise by testing) and reported to local animal control or wildlife officers. However, distemper is far more common in Tennessee than rabies. It is theoretically possible that domestic dogs could get distemper from wildlife, just as dogs and cats are at risk of contracting rabies from wildlife. There are good vaccinations available for dogs and cats which protect companion animals from these fatal diseases. Keep vaccinations current as recommended by your veterinarian. The general public should not encourage raccoons to come around homes and businesses. Remember that any food left out for domestic pets is an open invitation to raccoons as well as skunks.