

Canine Distemper in Florida Threatens Pet Dogs

University says increase in canine distemper in wildlife raises risk for dogs and shelters.

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Canine distemper virus is on the rise in the wild in Gainesville, Fla., University of Florida veterinarians said. Unvaccinated pet dogs and shelter populations are at greater risk for contracting the disease, according to the university.

Veterinarians collected swabs from the eyes and noses of five raccoons and one fox, then sent them to a diagnostic lab to screen for a variety of respiratory diseases. All samples came back positive for canine distemper, said Dr. Julie Levy, D.V.M., Ph.D., director of the Maddie's Shelter Medicine Program at UF's College of Veterinary Medicine.

"This worries us because the disease is quite contagious, and once a dog is infected with the virus, there is no effective treatment," Levy said. "More than 50 percent of the dogs that contract canine distemper will eventually die from it."

Hundreds of dogs died recently in Orange, Brevard and Pasco counties because of distemper outbreaks, according to the university.

At a time when many of Florida's animal shelters are experiencing budget cuts, Maddie's fund provides funding to allow UF's program to help whenever disease threatens homeless pets.