

## Examiner Column from Dr. Rosana Salvaterra, Medical Officer of Health Peterborough Public Health

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*Photo credit: Dr. Rosana Salvaterra*

### **Don't be fooled by furry critters in the wild**

What do bats, raccoons, skunks, squirrels, rabbits and foxes have in common? They live in our natural environment and they all have bitten humans in the last year, according to our records at Peterborough Public Health. Animal bites are reportable to public health and we follow up closely to make sure that people are not at risk for rabies, which is usually fatal in humans. Many of these bites occurred when humans attempted to feed wildlife. My best advice: don't. Don't feed or handle wild animals, and keep your pets immunized and away from the skunks, racoons, bats and foxes that may be harbouring the rabies virus here in southern Ontario.

I'll admit that feeding wildlife can be almost irresistible. Who hasn't been tempted? In fact, many of us feed song birds and sometimes, inadvertently, the neighbourhood squirrels. Birds rarely pose a hazard to humans, with the exception of pigeons and geese. Feces from geese are a major contaminant of water ways and beaches. Goose excrement teems with bacteria and parasites that can be harmful, including E. Coli. And pigeons harbour fungi like cryptococcosis and histoplasmosis which can infect and sicken people with weak immune systems. Bottom line: don't encourage pigeons and geese to gather in places where humans can become unintentional victims. Don't feed them. And it's best to avoid swimming in areas where geese have left their droppings.

Rodents like mice and rats are normal inhabitants of urban or rural settings and can cause illness through exposure to their urine and feces. The black rat and brown rat have had a close relationship with humans for millennia, feeding on crops and stored food. Brown rats are known to eat almost anything, and will attack rabbits or human babies. They are responsible for spreading bubonic plague in the Middle Ages, killing off about a third of the population in Europe at the time. Anecdotally, we are

seeing growing numbers of rats in the city of Peterborough these days. Pest control companies are reporting increased number of complaints and a quick search of the literature suggests best practice is to educate local home owners on ways to improve their environments to keep the rodents at bay. Removing edibles, like garbage, composting material and pet food are good places to start, as is keeping one's home in good repair to prevent entry by these unwelcome guests.

Small children are at a higher risk of becoming ill from their environments, just because they don't often have the best hand hygiene and are known to put soil and other outdoor discoveries into their mouths. Sand boxes should have covers on them, to protect them from becoming the local outdoor toilet for cats, racoons and other wildlife that can present a risk. For adults, wearing gloves while gardening is a good idea, especially for pregnant women. Donning a mask when cleaning up after mice can help protect against Hantavirus infection.

It is not recommended to use poisons as a way to control wild animals. Too often, it will be someone's beloved dog that will ingest the toxin, or possibly even a small child. Instead, we recommend working with a pest management expert, and changing the environment to make it less inviting to wildlife guests. This is similar to eliminating standing water as a way to reduce mosquito breeding. Whether we live in an urban or rural setting, we share the space with wildlife and although we may not always like these furry and unpredictable cohabitants, they are vital parts of our eco-systems and need to be treated with respect – as well as some fundamental knowledge and awareness – to keep us all healthy and safe!

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For more information about Dr. Salvaterra, her bio is available on this webpage:

<http://www.peterboroughpublichealth.ca/about-us/about-us-2/our-medical-officer-of-health/>