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Do Feral Cats Transmit Disease?

Very often when approaching the subject of Trap-Neuter-Vaccinate –Return (TNVR) for community cats with people opposing the practice, the first subject they will address is ‘disease.’ This is most often quickly followed with the word ‘rabies’ which strikes a fearful cord in most of us. The conversation usually leads to other diseases such as Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV), Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV), Feline Infectious Peritonitis (FIP), Toxoplasmosis and Cat-Scratch Disease (CSD).

Rabies can be contracted by any mammal, including humans, but I’ve never met anyone advocating that we kill all our wild animals like skunks and raccoons, or all of our farmed animals like cattle or pigs, but each of these animals can get this disease. This is also the reason for the “V” in TNVR. A vaccination against rabies is given at the time of spay or neuter, and the ear tipping that is performed identifies the cat as having had that vaccination along with the spay or neuter. FIV, FeLV and FIP are not diseases that can be passed on to humans at all so there is nothing for humans to fear from them.



Toxoplasmosis is a very common parasitic disease and is something that has been found in nearly all warm-blooded animals including pets and humans. This parasite rarely causes significant clinical disease in cats or any other species including humans! Although rare, it is recommended that pregnant women avoid it. The repeated advice for anyone actively concerned with avoiding it is to wear disposable gloves whenever in contact with cat feces and washing hands thoroughly when done.

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Cat-scratch Disease is caused by the bacterium “*Bartonella henselae*.” About 40% of all cats carry the infection at some point, but it does not make cats sick. However, the scratch or bite of an infected cat can cause symptoms in people, including: swollen lymph nodes, especially around the head, neck and upper limbs, fever, headache, fatigue and a decrease in appetite. The best way to avoid CSD is to avoid rough play with cats that could lead to scratches or bites. If you do get a scratch or bite, again, wash it immediately and conscientiously with soap and water.

Educating ourselves about these diseases and teaching others what we know about them will go a very long way in helping more municipalities endorse and embrace TNVR as being a more viable option than euthanasia.

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