Rabies – the latest fear that has enveloped the nation in light of the recent deaths caused by the deadly disease carried by animals, after almost 20 years.

While being wary and fearful is understandable, have we done enough to help curb the spread of the disease, and take precaution measures?

*Malaysian Digests*’ random survey with some pet owners as well as pet store personnel revealed that Malaysians are surprisingly laid-back on the matter, despite the latest outbreak.

**Hanna Hanapiah** shared that she is aware that her beloved two kittens can be infected with rabies, but chose not to have them vaccinated as they are indoor cats and hence, are away from contact with wild animals that could possibly be infected with rabies.

Meanwhile, **Hanan Syahmi As’ad** revealed that she is unaware that her pets could risk being infected with the disease although stated that her four cats get annual check-ups from the vet.

"My Persian mix-breed cat and golden retriever are indoor pets that are not exposed to other animals,” shared **Iyesha Maria**, and conveyed that her pets are not vaccinated for rabies despite knowing they could be infected.

In an enquiry to **Petsmore**, Wangsa Melawati, they enlightened us that only canines and felines who are one year and above are sent for vaccination.

"The animals are sent for normal (mandatory) vaccinations and check-ups. Rabies vaccination are up to the potential owners as it is not stipulated in our SOP to have them vaccinated for rabies seeing that it is an optional
vaccination,” the store keeper said.

**K&K Pet Avenue** in Wangsa Maju similarly relayed sending all their animals for rabies vaccination will be too costly, “So if we were to include rabies vaccination, we will have to increase the price of the animals to ensure we regain what we've spent,” the sales girl shared.

### Why Vaccinating Your Pets Matter

Unfortunately, under the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Malaysia is not declared as a rabies-free country because we share a border with Thailand – a border that has been dubbed as ‘The Immune Belt’ – hence why we often hear rabies cases occurring in Northern Malaysian states compared to Central and Southern, clarified Dr Calvin Cheah of Vets for Pets Animal Clinic (VPAC).

“Countries such as Singapore are declared rabies-free because they control the rabies virus within their pets population by making it mandatory for pet owners to give their pets rabies vaccination,” he told *Malaysian Digest*.

And because pet owners and businesses are not taking the responsibility they should, Dr Calvin says it might result in veterinarians euthanising animals suspected of rabies, as it is recommended by CDC to do so as a preventive measure from harming the lives of the human population.

“Globally, there is not a test kit that allows us vets to test for rabies via the animals’ blood sample. The only definitive diagnostic amongst animals is that we have to euthanise the animal.

“We decapitate it, get the brain sample and conduct a lab test to confirm whether the virus is present in the neurons or not,” he explained, acknowledging that the method is inhumane and urged pet owners to send their pets for rabies vaccination as it is always better to be safe than sorry.

“Ask yourselves: neutering and spaying your pets to help control the stray population versus killing and decapitating animals suspected of rabies to confirm whether they are carriers of the virus, which is more cruel?,” he put forth.

“At least if your pets are vaccinated, they still have a shot to be saved from a far more inhumane fate.”
Rabies

Rabies, a virus that attacks the nervous system and is fatal once symptoms develop, is passed to humans through bites and scratches from infected animals.

How rabies virus travels

- Spread through infected animal’s saliva.
- Occurs mainly in skunks, raccoons, foxes and bats, who can infect domestic cats, dogs, livestock.
- Incubation period in humans is about two months.

Treatment

- If animal tests positive for the virus or if animal cannot be tested, person will be given vaccine to prevent rabies from developing.
- If needed, vaccine should be given soon after exposure.

Prevention

- Make sure pets have current rabies shots.
- Keep pets in fenced yard or on a leash outside the home.

As it is, 95 per cent of the human rabies cases reported internationally are related to dog bites, says Dr Amilan Sivagurunathan.

Because of this, the President of Malaysian Small Animal Veterinary Association (MSAVA), tells us that, “The only way to permanently interrupt the diseases’ infectious cycle between animals and humans is by mass vaccination of dogs and cats at risk in the infected area and the euthanasia of positive cases.”

“This procedure will require authorisation from the Department of Veterinary Services (DVS) to implement a nationwide rabies campaign should they see the need for it. Anti-rabies serum would be available at authorised hospitals for humans bitten by a dog or cat that is suspected to be infected with rabies,” he added.

Humans Must Take Preventive Immunisation

Apart from ensuring animals are vaccinated to avoid rabies, humans too are encouraged to take preventive measures.

Following the recent fatalities, a report by World Health Organization (WHO) underlined that rabies amongst humans predominantly affects the poor and vulnerable populations who reside in remote rural locations.

On that note, we reached out to Associate Professor Dr Sasheela Sri La Sri Ponnampalavanar of UM Medical
Rabies: Why You Could Be The Next Victim Because Of Your Own Negligence

Centre to enlighten us on how the virus affects us humans as well.

“Based on international data by WHO, CDC and ECDC, there are approximately 50,000 deaths annually due to rabies infection across the globe,” she conveyed and added that the highest incidences and deaths are from India and closely followed by Africa.

“Those from the poorest areas and children below 15 years old are at greater risk of exposure and death from the infection as they may not be aware of the immediate measures that can be taken to prevent rabies after exposure and usually present only after symptoms occur.

“Additionally, their small size or physique may also contribute to the risk as the bite exposures are usually greater and more severe,” she said stating the main source of human rabies infection in these poor and remote areas are usually from stray dogs.

Regardless stray or domestic, the associate professor equally advised for pet owners and those who work closely with animals or travelling to a rabies endemic area to take preventive immunisation as a safety measure against the infection.

She shared the common human rabies vaccine Verorab, as well as pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) medication – are recommended for those at high risk of exposure to the rabies virus.

When asked about the mortality rate of those infected with the disease, Dr Sasheela revealed the heart-rending fact that once symptoms of rabies begin to show on the victims, the fatality rate is almost always 100 per cent.

“But timely PrEP soon after exposure to rabies virus is very effective in preventing rabies infection – which includes wound management and post-exposure human rabies immunisation,” she said with optimism.

“Post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) should be given as soon as possible before neurological symptoms have developed as it is considered futile when administered after the onset of clinical symptoms.”

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<td><strong>Wound Management</strong></td>
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<td>Cleaning the wound thoroughly with soap and water, detergent, povidone iodine, or other anti-viral substances</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Post-Exposure Immunisation</strong></td>
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<td>This includes human rabies vaccination and/or Rabies immunoglobulin depending on the type of injury and the pre exposure vaccination status</td>
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Underlining that no one is to be blamed for the rabies outbreak, Dr Sasheela emphasised that everyone is responsible in preventing an outbreak.

“The public have to be responsible pet owners – vaccinate their pets, take care of them, and don’t abandon unwanted puppies and dogs.

“They should be aware of measures to avoid dog bites and be educated about prompt dog bite management and should also immediately report to the authorities if they come across any cases of sick animals,” she detailed.

She further outlined that animal and human health authorities should have good surveillance systems to detect early outbreaks, as well as ensure there are good mitigation and prevention plans in place including vaccination
programmes for animals, apart from stressing on public education.

"Studies have shown that culling of animals is not an effective strategy of elimination and mass vaccination is most effective in reducing disease incidences of rabies in all species.

"Implementing such programmes in Bangladesh and America has resulted in significant reduction in the number of human rabies cases by 50 per cent and 95 per cent respectively," she stated and opined that perhaps Malaysia can follow suit.

**Doctors Can Raise More Awareness**

Meanwhile **Dr Jannatul** who often treats the needy in the east coast touched on the point that most rabies cases occur in rural areas – in which its residences lack awareness on the life-threatening virus.

And although she has never had first-hand experience treating the disease, she stated it is “vital to ensure the safety and well-being of civilians – especially children.”

While the urban folks are aware of rabies and tend to be more wary of stray animals, the general practitioner unveiled, “Some families residing in rural areas are not even aware of diseases or sicknesses such as bell’s palsy or hand, foot, mouth disease (HFMD).”

“Only when it is reported (or sensationalised) will people become more aware, and sadly it doesn’t even reach the whole of Malaysia,” she lamented.

“That’s why it’s important for the Ministry of Health (MoH) to conduct workshops in rural areas to educate them on these life-threatening diseases. As a medical practitioner, I suggest for experienced medical practitioners, under the MoH, to conduct (pro bono) check-ups and talks in rural areas on a monthly basis.

“We doctors took an oath to save and serve the people – is it impossible for us to spare our time and energy on those who are not as blessed or informed as those residing in urban areas?,” the doctor with 10 years of medical experience questioned.

Elaborating further on the role of medical practitioners, a representative from the MoH, who spoke with Malaysian Digest under the condition of anonymity, expressed that the ministry empathises with the public as this is the first (somewhat major) rabies case in the last 20 years.

“From my personal perspective, I believe every medical practitioner that specialises in Infectious Diseases and every state health departments in Malaysia is in disarray over the outbreak as the last we heard of deaths involving rabies was two decades ago,” the representative shared.

"Perhaps the signs were already there, especially when Malaysia lost its rabies-free status in September 2015 – just three years after our country was declared rabies-free," whilst referring to the rabies outbreak that occurred in 2015.

The representative shared that Penang, Kedah and Perlis were plagued with the infectious disease towards the end of 2015 with close to a hundred rabies cases being reported throughout the two-month outbreak.

“At this point of time, we are not able to provide the latest overall statistics as we are still monitoring the situation,” the source said while assuring that the ministry will be transparent with information revolving the disease.
Pic: LASS

While it is easier to blame the animals as they cannot speak for themselves, President of Lost Animal Souls Shelter (LASS) Vignes Chelliah reminded the public to take time and understand the issue without jumping to conclusions and pointing fingers.

Echoing Dr Jannatul's stance, she emphasised the overreaching problem here is not the rabies virus, but people who are inattentive to the serious matter and lack awareness.

“We as a society have to approach this with a sense of humanity and understanding, and come up with a proper way to address this. Just remember, we share this world with animals,” she urged.

With that in mind, perhaps rather than succumbing to fear and over worrying, we must first educate ourselves and be willing to do our part in resolving the issue — as only in doing so are we able to prevent more deaths from occurring amongst both humans and animals.

- Malaysian Digest