



Raccoons: Coexistence and Risk Management

Raccoons long ago joined the ranks of opossums, rabbits, rats, squirrels and yet others as denizens of our urban environment. They find shelter and sustenance around and sometimes within buildings. Raccoons are omnivorous. They are attracted to, and feast upon, diverse vegetable and animal matter, whether fresh or decaying. They're impressively intelligent, agile and persistent, and will often stymie our efforts to keep them away.

We can, and must, coexist with raccoons. They exploit a niche in the urban ecosystem, and they cannot be eliminated for practical and legal reasons.



Raccoons can be entertaining to watch, but they do pose some risk to public health. Never approach, feed or try to pet a raccoon. As cute as they may appear, they're wild animals and will defend themselves. They can bite and scratch, and they can transmit several disease-causing agents to people. These include rabies virus and raccoon roundworm. Raccoons are the predominant carrier of rabies virus in this region.

Persons, pets and domestic animals may become infected when a rabid raccoon (or other infected animal) bites or if mucous membranes or wounds become contaminated with that animal's saliva. Rabies is fatal if untreated. Highly effective vaccines are available to treat persons and pets following exposure to rabies virus, but the vaccine must be administered without undue delay.

Should a person or pet encounter a raccoon and suffer a bite, scratch or have contact with the animal's saliva, contact Harvard University Health Services or your health care provider immediately.



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Follow [EHS Wildlife Incidents: Emergency Protocols Flowchart](#) in the event that a member of the Harvard community has such an encounter with a raccoon or other animal.

Raccoons serve as hosts for raccoon roundworms, and the roundworm eggs are passed in the raccoon's feces. Human beings become infected by ingesting the eggs. Young children may find and eat contaminated objects in, for instance, outdoor sandboxes, and any other site where raccoons defecate may pose some risk to people and other animals. Risk of exposure may be reduced by covering sandboxes not in use, and taking other steps to reduce raccoon harborage and food availability in and around our buildings.



Raccoons can and will readily tear open plastic trash bags to access their contents. Hence, it is imperative that trash, recycling materials and compost be secured. Keeping the bags in bins and dumpsters is ideal, but these containers must be kept closed to reduce entry by raccoons and other pests. Even then, standard trash receptacles pose only a limited challenge.

Whenever possible, consider replacing traditional trash and recycling containers with solar-powered compacting versions, such as the Big Belly units that are already arrayed on our campuses and elsewhere. These are virtually pest and leak proof, and they can dramatically reduce labor costs because they do not need to be emptied as frequently.



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To further reduce raccoon activity around your buildings:

- Secure all wastes within hard-sided containers, and ensure that dumpster and waste bin lids are securely closed at all times.
- Remove disused construction materials or other such items.
- Stack wood and other items neatly and off the ground to reduce harborage for pests.
- Cut back weedy or overgrown areas.
- Ensure sheds and other outbuildings are securely closed and maintained to exclude pests.
- Frequently clean spilled trash from waste collection areas.
- Keep doors (including garage doors) completely closed.
- Improve outdoor lighting to discourage pests.
- Ask your landscapers or arborists to inspect trees for cavities where raccoons may nest, and seal these openings as appropriate.
- Contact EHS and your pest management provider should you see raccoons or have any questions about these or other pests.
- Advise students and personnel to avoid feeding or approaching wildlife, and to contact EHS and Harvard University Health Services immediately should there be any kind of direct contact.



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