



Alaska Division of Public Health

Prevention Promotion Protection

2011-12 Outbreak of Skin Lesions in Seals, Unusual Mortality Event (UME): Public Health Guidance for Contact with Marine Mammals

Updated 1/31/13

In 2011, over 200 ice seals were reported with the Unusual Mortality Event (UME) symptoms. Affected animals were primarily ringed seals, but the condition was also noted in spotted, bearded and one ribbon seal. Walrus were also included in the UME investigation due to the appearance of skin lesions. Reports were received from northern Alaska, Canada (NWT), Russia (Chukotka), and Japan with the majority of cases from around the North Slope and Bering Strait regions. In 2012, fewer cases were reported. Scientists from several different agencies have continued to investigate this UME to determine the cause(s) for the lesions and whether or not they pose any risk to humans who come in contact with the seals. To date, no single infectious pathogen has been linked to the lesions. Testing continues to discover whether disruptions in the endocrine system or changes in nutrition, among other factors, may contribute to the development of lesions.

General precautions to decrease the risk of acquiring any illness from wild game are always recommended, and include the following:

- Do not eat any animals that appear sick or diseased, or have washed up on shore;
- If you find a wild animal acting abnormally or showing signs of illness, notify your local wildlife authority;
- Avoid feeding meat from a sick or diseased animal to pets or other animals;
- Wear rubber gloves when butchering or handling animals;
- Thoroughly wash your hands and all of your equipment after working with animals;
- Cooking your game before eating it can reduce the risk of infection from different parasites, viruses, and bacteria that may be present in raw food; and
- If you feel sick, contact your local community health care provider.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), National Marine Fisheries Service has a hotline for reporting marine mammal strandings in Alaska: 1-877-925-7773. NOAA is also posting press release updates about the ongoing situation on the Alaska region website: <http://alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/protectedresources/seals/ice/diseased/default.htm>.