

## Pets on frontline as Taiwan battles rabies outbreak

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Taiwan Sunday called on citizens to vaccinate their pet cats and dogs against rabies as health officials stepped up attempts to combat the deadly disease following a string of outbreaks among wild ferret-badgers.

Their call came after five more infections within ferret-[badgers](#)—a small mammal of the mustelidae family—were confirmed, bringing the total to 11.

Taiwan is now listed as a [rabies](#)-affected area by the Paris-headquartered World Organisation for Animal health (OIE) after the island confirmed on July 17 that three infections had been found, the first [outbreaks](#) since 1959.

Those cases were recorded in central Taiwan but the later outbreaks were documented in the south and southeast part of the island, prompting [health authorities](#) to take counter-measures including the vaccination of tens of thousands of canines and cats.

"In doing so hopefully the outbreaks can be contained in some areas," Edward Chao, the spokesman for the Bureau of Animal and Plant Health Inspection and Quarantine, told AFP.

So far only ferret-badgers have been confirmed as infected but fears of rabies spreading to other species have mounted.

Officials are particularly concerned that domestic cats and dogs could become infected which would significantly increase the risk to humans.

"If the other species like dogs and cats became infected, it would be much harder to deal with because they get much closer to the general public in daily life," Chao said.

He estimated around 40 percent of locals vaccinate their pets against rabies and called on those who haven't to ensure their dogs and cats receive shots as soon as possible.

Only 10 countries and regions in the world are listed as rabies-free and around 55,000 people die of the disease worldwide every year.

Symptoms in humans may include seizures, partial paralysis, fever and [brain inflammation](#), or [encephalitis](#). There is no known treatment to cure rabies, once the infection has taken hold.

Chao said he suspected the outbreaks were caused by the smuggling of infected ferret-badgers from the Chinese mainland as its ties with the island have been getting ever closer the past few years.

The badgers are often transported to tourist areas in the mountains where they are cooked as delicacies, he added.

On Monday, some 300 people involved in rabies prevention work will be given shots and another 1,000 will be vaccinated next month as part of the island's attempt to step up their campaign against the virus.

The authorities have also urged the public not to abandon their pets or touch wild animals.

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