
Rabies

What You Need to Know



What is rabies?

Rabies is a virus that infects the brain and central nervous system of humans and animals.

What are the symptoms of rabies infection?

Early symptoms of rabies infection include fever, headaches, weakness, and discomfort, as well as a prickling or itching sensation at the site of the bite.

Later symptoms include agitation, anxiety, insomnia, confusion, delirium, hallucinations, hydrophobia (fear of water), difficulty swallowing, drooling, partial paralysis, and eventual death (**nearly 100% fatal**).

How long after exposure do symptoms begin?

It may take weeks or months to get sick after exposure. This can vary depending upon the location of the bite, type of rabies virus, and any existing rabies immunity.

How is rabies spread?

The rabies virus is found in the saliva of infected animals. The virus is spread through a bite or scratch from an infected animal.

What animals are most often affected?

Animals most often affected by rabies are bats, skunks, foxes, and raccoons. Bats are the most common source of human rabies exposure in the United States. Domestic cats and dogs are rarely found to be rabid. Small rodents, such as squirrels, chipmunks, mice, rats, hamsters, rabbits or hares are almost never found to be infected with rabies and have not been known to transmit rabies to humans.

How can rabies be prevented?

- Have pets vaccinated regularly. This will protect them if exposed to animals with the disease and prevent them from becoming ill and infecting humans.
- Do not handle stray, wild, or dead animals. Keep away from unfamiliar animals, especially if they are acting strangely, such as having problems swallowing, exhibiting lots of drool or saliva, appearing more tame than you would expect, biting at everything, and/or having trouble moving or is paralyzed.
- If you find a bat in your home, **DO NOT RELEASE IT**. Safely capture it using the following instructions:
 - Find a small container (like a box or a large can) and a piece of cardboard large enough to cover the opening in the container. Punch small air holes in the cardboard.
 - Put on leather work gloves. When the bat lands, approach it slowly and place the container over it. Slide the cardboard under the container to trap the bat inside.
 - Tape the cardboard to the container to secure the bat inside, then contact your health department to have the bat tested for rabies.

- Keep pets indoors and supervised when outdoors, to limit their exposure to wild animals that might be rabid. Use a leash when walking dogs or keep them in a fenced-in yard and supervised.
- Do not feed or put water for pets outside unsupervised. Do not leave pet food outside overnight.
- Keep garbage securely covered, as these items may attract wild or stray animals.

What to do if exposed and/or bitten?

- Clean the wound immediately and thoroughly with soap and warm water; this is the most effective prevention against rabies.
- Promptly contact a medical professional.
- If a domestic animal was bitten, call a veterinarian and follow his/her advice.

What information is needed to help decide if rabies treatment is required?

- The kind of animal involved.
- If the animal was wild, domestic, or stray (in general, wild animal bites are always of more concern than domestic pets).
- If the animal was domestic, whether it was vaccinated.
- If the skin was broken from the bite, what extent was the skin broken, and if there was bleeding from the wound.

What are the general guidelines for rabies treatment?

Rabies treatment is usually recommended for a wild animal bite, and sometimes for a domestic animal bite, when the animal is not available for testing/observation. Rabies treatment is also recommended after exposure to a bat while sleeping.

What is used to prevent rabies infection after exposure?

Two types of treatment must be used together to prevent rabies disease once a person has been exposed:

- Rabies Immune Globulin containing antibodies to fight the virus; AND
- Rabies vaccine – typically four doses given over two weeks helps you develop your own antibodies to the rabies virus.

What may happen to animals that have bitten someone?

- Healthy dogs/cats: Observed for ten days for signs of illness.
- Wild and stray animals: Humanely destroyed and brain tissue sent for immediate testing.

For more information about possible rabies exposure, call (248) 858-1286, toll free 1 (800) 848-5533, Ext 8-1286. If bitten after Health Division business hours, seek medical attention for wound care. Your provider will work with the Health Division to report the bite and assess for potential rabies exposure.



NURSE ON CALL PUBLIC HEALTH INFORMATION HOTLINE
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