

FACT SHEET

Rabies and Animal Bites

What is rabies?

Rabies is a fatal viral disease that is transmitted to humans by exposure to rabid animals. It infects the central nervous system and requires immediate medical attention to avoid disease in the brain.

How is rabies spread?

The rabies virus is present in the saliva of infected animals. The virus is spread through a bite or scratch from an infected animal or through contact with intact mucous membranes. It is also possible, but rare, for people to get rabies from non-bite exposures, which can include scratches, abrasions, or open wounds that are exposed to saliva or other potentially infectious material from a rabid animal.

Wild animals most likely to harbor rabies are the bat, skunk, fox, wolf, and raccoon. It is possible, but not as likely, for dogs, cats, ferrets, cattle, horses, sheep, goats, swine, bobcats, and coyotes to be rabid.

What are the symptoms?

- Early symptoms can include lethargy, fever, vomiting, and loss of appetite.
- Later symptoms (within days of infection) can include ataxia, weakness, paralysis, seizures, difficulty breathing, difficulty swallowing, excessive salivation, abnormal behavior, aggression, and/or self-mutilation.
- Rabies is nearly always fatal.

How can rabies be prevented?

- Leave all wildlife alone. Contact with infected bats is the leading cause of rabies death in people in the U.S.
- Wash animal bites and scratches immediately with soap and water.
- Talk to a doctor if you've been bitten or scratched by an animal.
- Vaccinate your pets to protect them and your family.

How is rabies treated?

See your doctor immediately after an animal attack and discuss whether there is a need for rabies vaccination. Postexposure prophylaxis (PEP) can be used. This is a single dose of immune globulin, and four doses of rabies vaccine given in the arm over a 14-day period.

This fact sheet is for informational purposes only and is not intended for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information contact your health care provider or visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at www.cdc.gov.

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