

What you should know about rabies

What is rabies?

Rabies is a deadly disease caused by a virus that attacks the nervous system. The virus is usually transmitted by a bite from a rabid animal. Prompt and appropriate treatment after being bitten and before the disease develops can stop the infection and prevent the disease in humans.

What animals get rabies?

Only mammals can get rabies; birds, fish, reptiles and amphibians do not. Most cases of rabies occur in wild animals - mainly skunks, raccoons, bats and foxes. In recent years, cats have become the most common domestic animal infected with rabies because many cats are not vaccinated and are exposed to rabid wildlife while outside. Rabies also occurs in dogs and cattle in significant numbers and has been diagnosed in horses, goats, sheep, swine and ferrets.

Improved vaccination programs and control of stray animals have been effective in preventing rabies in most pets. Approved rabies vaccines are available for cats, dogs, ferrets, horses, cattle and sheep. Licensed oral vaccines have been used for mass immunization of wildlife with the approval of the state agency responsible for animal rabies control.



Rabies and Humans

Rabies vaccination and animal control programs, along with better treatment for people who have been bitten, have dramatically reduced the number of human cases of rabies in the United States. Most of the relatively few, recent human cases acquired in this country have resulted from exposures to bats.

Dogs are still a significant source of rabies in other countries. Travelers should be aware of this risk when traveling outside of the United States.

What you can do to help control rabies

- Have your veterinarian vaccinate your dogs, cats, ferrets, and selective horses and livestock. Your veterinarian will advise you on the recommended or required frequency of vaccination in your locality.
- Reduce the possibility of exposure to rabies by not letting your pets roam free. Don't leave exposed garbage or pet food outside as it may attract wild or stray animals.
- Wild animals should never be kept as pets. Not only may this be illegal but wild animals pose a potential rabies threat to caretakers and to others.
- Observe all wild animals from a distance - even if they appear to be friendly. A rabid wild animal may appear tame but don't go near it. Not all rabid animals foam at the mouth and appear mad.
- If you see a wild animal acting strangely, report it to the city or county animal control department.

If your pet has bitten someone

- Urge the victim to see a physician immediately and to follow the physician's recommendations.
- Check with your veterinarian to determine whether your pet's vaccinations are up-to-date.
- Report the bite to the local health department and animal control authorities. If your pet is a cat, dog or ferret, the officials will confine the animal and watch it closely for ten days. Home confinement may be allowed.
- Immediately report any illness or unusual behavior by your pet to the local health department and your veterinarian.
- Don't let your pet stray and don't give your pet away. The animal must be available for observation by public health authorities or a veterinarian.
- After the recommended observation period, have your pet vaccinated for rabies if it does not have a current rabies vaccination.

If your pet has been bitten by a potentially rabid animal

- Consult your veterinarian immediately and report the bite to local animal control authorities.
- Dogs, cats and ferrets that are currently vaccinated should be revaccinated immediately, kept under the owner's control, and observed for a period as specified by state law or local ordinance (normally 45 days or more). Animals with expired vaccinations will need to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.
- Unvaccinated dogs, cats and ferrets exposed to a rabid animal may need to be euthanized immediately. Alternatively, the animal should be checked, placed in strict isolation for six months, and vaccinated one month before being released.
- Animals other than dogs, cats, and ferrets that are bitten by a rabid animal should be euthanized immediately.

If you have been bitten

- Don't panic, but don't ignore the bite either. Wash the wound thoroughly and vigorously with soap and lots of water. Call your physician immediately and explain how you were bitten and follow the doctor's advice.
- Capture the animal under a large box or other container (if that can be done safely), or try to identify it before it runs away. Once captured, don't try to pick the animal up. Call the local animal control authorities to collect the animal.
- If it is a wild animal, only try to capture it if you can do so without getting bitten again. If the animal cannot be contained and must be killed to prevent its escape, do so without damaging the head. The brain will be needed to test for rabies.
- Report the bite to the local health department.

Your family physician

It is extremely important that you notify your family physician immediately after an animal bites you. Your physician can find out whether the animal has been captured. Capture and observation of the animal can affect treatment decisions for your bite. If necessary, your physician will give you the anti-rabies treatment recommended by the United States Public Health Service and may also decide to treat you for other possible infections that could result from the bite.

For more information on rabies, contact your veterinarian or your local health department.

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