

RABIES FACT SHEET



NEWYORK STATE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

WHAT IS RABIES?

Rabies is a deadly disease caused by a virus that attacks the nervous system. The virus is present in the saliva and nervous tissue of a rabid animal.

WHAT ANIMALS CAN GET RABIES?

Rabies is most often seen among wild mammals such as raccoons, bats, skunks and foxes. Cats, dogs, ferrets and livestock can also get rabies if they are not vaccinated to protect them. Deer and large rodents, such as woodchucks, have been found rabid in areas affected by raccoon rabies.

Some animals *almost never* get rabies. These include wild rabbits, squirrels, chipmunks, rats, mice, guinea pigs, gerbils and hamsters. They can get rabies, but it *almost never* happens.

There are other animals that *never ever* get rabies. They are birds, snakes, fish, turtles, lizards and insects.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF RABIES IN ANIMALS?

The first sign of rabies is usually a change in the animal's behavior. It may become unusually aggressive or unusually tame. The animal may lose fear of people and natural enemies. It may become excited, irritable and snap at anything in its path. Or, it may appear affectionate and friendly. Staggering, convulsions, spitting, choking, frothing at the mouth and paralysis are sometimes noted. Many animals have a marked change in voice. The animal usually dies within one week after showing signs of rabies.

HOW DO PEOPLE BECOME EXPOSED TO RABIES?

People usually get exposed to the rabies virus when an infected animal bites them. Exposure may also occur if saliva enters a scratch, open cut or mucous membrane (eyes, nose, mouth).

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IF YOU ARE EXPOSED TO RABIES?

Wash the wound thoroughly with soap and water and seek medical attention immediately. Contact your doctor and your county health authority immediately. Try to capture the animal without damaging its head or risking further exposure.

If an apparently healthy domestic dog, cat, ferret or other domestic animal bites a person, it must be captured, confined, and observed daily for ten days following the bite. If it remains healthy during this period, the animal did not transmit rabies at the time of the bite. All wild animals must be tested for rabies if human exposures have occurred. Report all animal bites to the county health authority.

If a rabies-suspect biting animal cannot be observed or tested, or it tests positive for rabies, treatment should begin immediately. Human treatment consists of a dose of rabies immune globulin administered as soon as possible after exposure. If there is a wound, the full dose of immune globulin should go into the wound, if possible. The first of five doses of rabies vaccine is given at the same time, with the remaining injections given one each on days 3, 7, 14, and 28 following the initial injection.

People in high-risk occupations such as veterinarians, wildlife biologists, wildlife rehabilitators, animal control officers and taxidermists should consider obtaining rabies pre-exposure vaccination which

consists of three injections of rabies vaccine in the arm, the first two a week apart, and the third 14 to 21 days later. A blood sample should be checked every two years to determine the need for an additional injection of vaccine (booster) if the risk of contact continues. A person already vaccinated and later exposed to rabies must receive two booster injections three days apart immediately after exposure.

WHAT IF MY PET IS EXPOSED TO A RABID ANIMAL?

If your pet has been in a fight with another animal, wear gloves to handle it. Isolate it from other animals and people for several hours. Call your veterinarian. Your vaccinated pet will need a booster immunization with rabies vaccine within five days of the exposure. Unvaccinated animals exposed to a known or suspected rabid animal must be confined for six months or humanely destroyed.

WHAT CAN PEOPLE DO TO PROTECT THEMSELVES AGAINST RABIES?

Don't feed, touch or adopt wild animals, stray dogs or cats.

Be sure your dogs, cats and ferrets are up-to-date on their rabies vaccinations. Vaccinated pets serve as a buffer between rabid wildlife and man. Protect them, and you may reduce *your* risk of exposure to rabies. Vaccines for dogs, cats and ferrets after three months of age are effective for a one year period. Revaccinations in dogs and cats are effective for up to three years. Pets too young to be vaccinated should be kept indoors. Some new vaccines have now been licensed, and therefore, can be used for younger animals.

Keep family pets indoors at night. Don't leave them outside unattended or let them roam free.

Don't attract wild animals to your home or yard. Keep your property free of stored bird seed or other foods which may attract wild animals. Feed pets indoors. Tightly cap or put away garbage cans. Board up any openings to your attic, basement, porch or garage. Cap your chimney with screens.

Bats can be particularly difficult to keep out of buildings because they can get through cracks as small as a pencil. Methods to keep bats out (batproofing) of homes and summer camps should be done during the fall and winter. If bats are already inside (e.g., in an attic or other areas), consult with your county health authority about humane ways to remove them.

Encourage children to immediately tell an adult if they are bitten by any animal. Tell children not to touch any animal they do not know.

If a wild animal is on your property, let it wander away. Bring children and pets indoors and alert neighbors who are outside. You may contact a nuisance wildlife control officer who will remove the animal for a fee.

Report all animal bites or contact with wild animals to your county health authority. Don't let any animal escape that has possibly exposed someone to rabies. Depending on the species, it can be observed or tested for rabies in order to avoid the need for rabies treatment. **This includes bats with skin contact or found in a room with a sleeping person, unattended child, or someone with mental impairment. Bats have small, sharp teeth and in certain circumstances people can be bitten and not know it.**

WHERE CAN I GET MORE INFORMATION ABOUT RABIES?

Contact your county health authority. Each county health authority in New York State has a plan to respond to rabies that includes information on human treatment and submitting animal specimens for rabies testing. The county health authority is your best source of additional rabies information.