

New York State Department of Health

Rabies (hydrophobia)

Last Reviewed: January 2008

What is rabies?

Rabies is a viral disease affecting the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord). It is transmitted from infected mammals to man and is almost always fatal once symptoms appear. Fortunately, only a few human cases are reported each year in the United States.

Who gets rabies?

All warm blooded mammals including man can get rabies. Among wild animals, rabies is most often seen in raccoons, bats, skunks and foxes.

How do people get rabies?

People can get rabies if they are exposed to the saliva or nervous tissue of a rabid animal through a bite or scratch. Although rare, exposure can also occur if infected saliva or nervous tissue gets into a fresh wound (one that has bled within 24 hours) or mucous membrane (eyes, nose, mouth). There have also been a few cases of person-to-person transmission in corneal transplant recipients when it was not known that donors were infected with rabies.

Can people be exposed to rabies and not know it?

Bats have small, sharp teeth that may not leave a visible puncture wound or noticeable pain at the bite site, therefore it is possible to be bitten without knowing it as described in the following scenarios. These scenarios indicate a reasonable probability that an exposure could have occurred:

- contact between a person's bare skin and the bat's head (or any part of the bat while not looking directly at the bat)
- bat found in a room with a sleeping person
- bat found in a room with an unattended child
- in some circumstances, bat found close to an unattended child outdoors
- bat found in a room with a person under the influence of alcohol or drugs or with other sensory or mental impairment

What should be done if a bat is found indoors?

If the bat is found in any scenarios indicating reasonable probability of exposure, as listed above, it should be captured and tested for rabies. To avoid losing the bat, leave one person in the room watching it with doors and windows closed, while another person goes to get a coffee can, lid, gloves, or similar equipment to capture it. Your local health authority may also be contacted for advice on how to capture the bat and submit it for rabies testing. If it is certain the bat did not have contact with a person or pet, the bat can be allowed to leave through an open window. Do not exit the room until you observe the bat leaving through the window. Close the window when the bat leaves.

What are the symptoms of rabies?

Early symptoms include irritability, headache, fever and sometimes itching or pain at the site of exposure. Within days, the disease progresses to paralysis, spasms of the throat muscles, convulsions, delirium and death.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

The incubation period (time between exposure to the virus and the start of symptoms) is variable but is normally two to eight weeks. Incubation periods of over one year have been reported.

What is the treatment for rabies?

First, the wound should be washed with lots of soap and water. Treatment consists of one dose of rabies immune globulin (dosage dependent on body weight) and five doses of rabies vaccine given on days 0, 3, 7, 14 and 28 after exposure. The rabies immune globulin should be given as soon as possible after exposure. The full amount should be put into the wound, if possible. The first dose of vaccine should be given at the same time but in a different site, usually in the upper arm.

What happens if a rabies exposure goes untreated?

Exposure to a rabid animal does not always result in rabies. If treatment is obtained promptly following a rabies exposure, most cases of rabies will be prevented. Untreated cases will invariably result in death.

What can be done to protect a pet from rabies?

All cats, dogs and ferrets should be vaccinated against rabies starting at three months of age and again one year later. After that they should be placed on a one- or three-year schedule, depending on the vaccine used, for regular booster shots.

Why is pet vaccination important?

Pet vaccination is important because vaccinated pets act as a barrier between wild animals and people to keep the rabies virus from spreading.

What should be done if a vaccinated pet fights with another animal?

Any time your pet fights with a wild animal, or another pet, contact your local health authority for advice on what to do. Even though your pet has been vaccinated, a booster dose of rabies vaccine may be needed within five days of the incident. If your pet fought with a known or suspect rabid animal this will keep your pet from getting rabies as a result of the current incident.

What can be done to prevent the spread of rabies?

Exposure to rabies may be minimized by:

- having all pets vaccinated and keeping them up-to-date on their vaccinations
- avoiding contact with all wild animals, especially those acting abnormally.

To control the spread of rabies in wild animals such as raccoons, the New York State Department of Health oversees projects to distribute a special bait containing rabies vaccine. Baits are placed in wooded areas in order to immunize raccoons against rabies - an effort to reduce the spread of rabies in the wildlife population.

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