

RABIES. WHAT IS IT?



WHAT IS RABIES?

Rabies is a viral infection spread through infected saliva. It is usually a fatal disease that can affect all warm-blooded animals, including humans. It is usually transmitted through the saliva of an infected animal by a bite, through an open sore or cut on the skin, or, very rarely, by a scratch.

In North America is most commonly found in wild animals such as skunks, raccoons, bats, foxes, and muskrats. Most often these wild animals are what infect our pets and livestock. More cases of rabies are now reported annually among cats than among dogs. Rarely is rabies found in small rodents such as rabbits, squirrels, chipmunks, rats, mice, gerbils, or hamsters.

WHAT DEFINES AN “EXPOSURE”?

An exposure requires:

1. Presence of infective virus
 - a. Typically in saliva, however it can be in neural tissue or in cerebral spinal fluid.
 - b. Contact with blood, urine, or feces DOES NOT count.
 - c. Rabies virus in noninfectious if found in dried materials.
2. The potentially infectious material must come in contact with an open wound, scratch, abrasion, or mucosal surface (eyes, mouth, and nose). The most common exposures occur through a bite.

Be extra careful with the bites from bats. The bite is so small that often people don't even realize that they have been bitten by a bat. If you have been in close contact with a bat but cannot be sure that you were bitten or scratched, please seek medical care.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF RABIES?

The time from when someone gets bitten and the symptoms of rabies occur varies widely. Typically it takes between 30 and 90 days. However, it can range from 5 days to greater than 2 years.

Symptoms may start with:

- Fever
- Chills
- General feeling of illness
- Vague respiratory, gastrointestinal, and neurological symptoms
- Paresthesia (tingling) at the bite site.

A rabies victim then develops one or two forms of rabies symptoms. About 80% of people experience the furious form.

Furious Form

- Hallucinations, agitation
- Thrashing, biting, running
- Hydrophobia (fear of water)
- Aerophobia (fear of drafts or air)
- Changing of mental status

Paralytic Form

- Weakness
- Paralysis

In both forms the victim will experience:

- Fever
- Convulsions
- Coma
- Death

WHAT IS THE TREATMENT FOR RABIES?

After getting exposed or bitten, immediately wash the wound with soap and water for at least 10 minutes. If you are uncertain if the animal is vaccinated for rabies seek medical care. If your medical provider feels you have had rabies exposure then you will be treated with a series of shots. These shots will provide you with immunity to the rabies virus if given immediately after an exposure. However, unfortunately there is no known effective treatment for rabies once symptoms appear.