

RABIES: What You Should Know

RABIES is a deadly disease caused by a virus that attacks the nervous system. Rabies is on the rise in many parts of the country. Fortunately you can take steps to protect yourself, your family, and any animals you own.

The virus only affects mammals (warm-blooded animals who nurse their young). This means pets, livestock, wildlife, and people are at risk.

The rabies virus lives in the saliva and brain tissue of infected animals. Rabies is fatal once the virus reaches the brain in all animals as well as in man. The disease is spread mainly through bites from infected animals. Although much less common, rabies can also be contacted through scratches from an infected animal or when infected saliva or brain tissue comes in contact with open wounds, skin breaks, or mucous membranes of the eyes, nose, and mouth.

Mainly wild animals carry rabies, most commonly by raccoons, skunks, bats, and foxes. However, stray dogs and cats can also be carriers. Domestic animals such as dogs, cats, and farm animals can easily pick up rabies from wild or stray animals.

Regardless of the form of rabies, the end result is paralysis, coma, and death. Rabies cases take two forms:

- **“Dumb Rabies”** cases exhibit signs of the animal becoming shy or unusually approachable. These animals may be sluggish, confused, and depressed.
- **“Furious Rabies”** cases are very irritable and may be aggressive. At times it may seem confused and calm, then suddenly attack when approached. It may lose all caution for natural enemies.

WAYS TO PROTECT YOURSELF, YOUR FAMILY, & YOUR PETS:

- Avoid contact with all wild animals. Never attempt to feed or handle any wild animal. Never adopt wild animals as pets.
- Keep wild animals out of your home. Secure doors and windows, cap chimneys with screens, and close off any opening in porches, basements, and attics.
- Stay away from strays. You never know if they have been properly vaccinated. Report strays to your local animal control officer.
- Secure trash and any other potential food outdoors in animal-proof containers to avoid attracting wild or stray animals.
- Have all pets vaccinated by a licensed veterinarian to ensure adequate protection develops. Give boosters as recommended by the veterinarian in your area.
- Never feed your pet's outdoors. Keep the area around your home free of table scraps and other things that might attract stray animals.

- Confine your pets to your property. Pets that are allowed to roam are at higher risk for rabies exposure and infection.
- Act on any attack or bite suffered by your pet or you. If the pet is bitten, contact your veterinarian. If a human is bitten, contact your human physician or hospital emergency room.
- Know the signs of rabies. A change in “expected behavior” is the most consistent sign of rabies. Common signs are shyness or unusually approachable, excitability and aggression, daytime activity in animals normally only active at night, staggering, weakness, and paralysis, changes in the sound of the animal’s voice, drooling, frothing at the mouth, and convulsions.
- Know what to do if bitten by a wild or stray animal or by a pet:
- Wash the wound thoroughly with warm, soapy water.
- If the animal is a pet, get the owner’s name, address, and ask for proof of vaccination.
- If the animal is wild, confine if possible. Call the local animal control authorities at once. Kill the animal only as a last resort, but do not damage its head. The animal’s brain tissue is the only tissue that can be tested.
- Call your physician at once.
- Report the bite to the local health department or animal control authorities.