

RABIES FACT SHEET



Adapted from the New York 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 saliva and in the nervous tissue of a rabid animal. Rabies causes encephalitis, or inflammation of the brain.

What animals can get rabies?

Rabies is most often seen among wild mammals such as raccoons, bats, skunks, and foxes. Cats, dogs, 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 rabies.

What are the signs of rabies in an animal?

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. Nocturnal animals seen during the day may also be rabid. 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 scratched by an infected animal or if saliva enters an open cut or mucous membrane (nose, mouth, eyes). Many New Yorkers have been exposed to the rabies virus by handling their pet after an attack and getting the saliva of the rabid animal on their hands.

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 county health authority and doctor immediately, or proceed to the Emergency Room. Do not try to capture the animal as a professional will be called in to do so, and the head of the suspected animal will be sent to the state or county testing laboratory for examination.

If an apparently healthy domestic dog or cat bites a human, 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. 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 must begin immediately. Human treatment consists of a dose of rabies-immune globulin administered as soon as possible after exposure to the area where the bite occurred, or if necessary in the arm or leg. 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 occupation 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. Periodic single boosters are generally required every two years 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 dose of 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?

Do not feed, touch or adopt wild animals, stray dogs or cats.

Be sure your dogs and cats 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 and cats after three months of age are effective for a one-year period. Revaccinations are effective for up to three years. Pets too young to be vaccinated should be kept indoors.

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 birdseed or other foods which may attract wild animals. Feed pets indoors. Tightly cap or put away garbage cans. Board up any opening to your attic, basement, porch or garage. Cap your chimney with screens.

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.

Report all animal bites or contact with wild animals to your county health authority.

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.

Where can I get more information about rabies?

Contact your county health authority. They are your best source of additional rabies information. Each county health authority in New York State has a plan to respond to rabies. Contact them for details regarding human treatment and animal submission/shipment for testing at 366-8831 or 363-4231 (753-4232) Sheriff's Department after hours.