

Rabies FAQ

What Is Rabies?

Rabies is a virus that may affect the brain and spinal cord of all mammals, including dogs, cats and humans. Though preventable, there is good reason that the word “rabies” evokes fear in people. The disease has been reported in every state except Hawaii, and everywhere throughout the world except for Australia and Antarctica. Annually, rabies causes the deaths of more than 50,000 humans and millions of animals worldwide. Once symptoms appear, the disease results in fatality.

How Would My Animal Get Rabies?

Since animals who have rabies secrete large amounts of virus in their saliva, the disease is primarily passed to animals through a bite from an infected animal. It can also be transmitted through a scratch or when infected saliva makes contact with mucous membranes or an open, fresh wound. The risk runs highest if your animal is exposed to wild animals. The most common carriers of the rabies virus in this country are bats, raccoons, skunks and foxes. In the United States, rabies is reported in cats more than in any domestic species. If there are also cats in your household, it’s important to make sure they are vaccinated and kept indoors.

What Are the General Symptoms of Rabies?

Initially, an animal who’s become infected may show extreme behavioral changes such as restlessness or apprehension, both of which may be compounded by aggression. Friendly dogs may become irritable, while normally excitable animals may become more docile. An animal may bite or snap at any form of stimulus, attacking other animals, humans and even inanimate objects. They may constantly lick, bite and chew at the site where they were bitten. A fever may also be present at this stage.

As the virus progresses, an infected animal may become hypersensitive to touch, light and sound. They may eat unusual things and hide in dark places. Paralysis of the throat and jaw muscles may follow, resulting in the well-known symptom of foaming at the mouth. Disorientation, incoordination and staggering may occur, caused by paralysis of the hind legs. Other classic signs of rabies include loss of appetite, weakness, seizures and sudden death.

How Long After Infection Do Signs of Rabies Show?

The virus usually incubates from two to eight weeks before signs are noticed. However, transmission of the virus through saliva can happen as early as ten days before symptoms appear.

Which Animals Are Most at Risk For Contracting Rabies?

Unvaccinated animals who are allowed to roam outdoors without supervision are most at risk for infection. They’re exposed to wild animals and have a greater chance of fighting with infected stray dogs or cats.

How Is Rabies Diagnosed?

There is no accurate test to diagnose rabies in live animals. The direct fluorescent antibody test is the most accurate test for diagnosis--but because it requires brain tissue, it can only be performed after the death of the animal.

How Is Rabies Treated?

There is no treatment or cure for rabies once symptoms appear. Since rabies presents a serious public health threat, animals who are suspected of having the virus are most often euthanized.

How Can Rabies Be Prevented?

Keeping your animal up to date with vaccinations is not only essential to prevention, it's the law.

Vaccinating your pet not only protects him from getting rabies, it protects him if he bites someone. animals who have bitten humans are required to be confined for at least 10 days to see if rabies develops, and if the animal's vaccination records are not current, a lengthy quarantine or even euthanasia may be mandated.

Avoiding contact with wild animals is also necessary to prevention. You may greatly decrease chances of rabies transmission by walking your dog on a leash, and supervising him while he's outdoors.

What Should I Do If I Think My Animal Has Had Contact with A Rabid Animal?

Call your veterinarian for an immediate appointment! Report the incident to your local health department and follow their recommendations. You'll also need to contact local animal control officers if the animal that bit your pet is still at large; they will be best able to safely apprehend and remove the animal from the environment. After having contact with a rabid animal, the rabies virus may remain alive on your pet's skin for up to two hours. It is best not to touch your dog during this time. If you must handle your animal, wear gloves and protective clothing.

An animal that is up to date with his vaccinations and who has been bitten by a possibly rabid animal should also be given a rabies booster immediately and kept under observation for 45 days.

What Should I Do If I Think I've Been Bitten by a Rabid Animal?

Call your doctor immediately for instructions! You may need to get a series of injections in order to protect your health. Also, contact your local health department to report the bite.

Note: Do not attempt to handle or capture a wild animal, especially if he is acting strangely (i.e., a nocturnal animal who is out during the day, an animal who acts unusually tame