

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Rabies

What is rabies?

Rabies is a disease caused by a virus that can affect all warm-blooded animals, including people. Once symptoms appear, people infected with the rabies virus almost always die. Rabies is found naturally in a number of animals in Missouri, especially skunks and bats. Wild animals can transmit infection to dogs and cats which then transmit it to people (or people can catch it directly from wild animals).

How is rabies transmitted?

People usually get rabies from the bite of a rabid animal. It is also possible, but quite rare, that people may get rabies if infectious material from a rabid animal, such as saliva, gets directly into their eyes, nose, mouth, or a wound.

Can I get rabies in any way other than an animal bite?

Non-bite exposures to rabies are very rare. Scratches, abrasions, open wounds, or mucous membranes contaminated with saliva from a rabid animal constitute non-bite exposures. These types of exposure only occasionally require post exposure treatment. Spray from a rabid skunk does not contain rabies virus. Other contact, such as petting a rabid animal or contact with the blood, urine or feces (e.g., bat guano) of a rabid animal, does not constitute an exposure and is not an indication for treatment.

How do I know if an animal has rabies?

The first observable symptoms may be changes in personality. For example, a normally friendly, active dog may become shy and sluggish while an animal that is normally quiet and shy may become aggressive and attack other animals or people. A wild animal that is normally active only at night may become active during the daytime. Also, some rabid wild animals lose their natural fear of people and other animals. Other symptoms include: refusal to eat; unusual excitability or restlessness; snarling or growling at moving objects; and excessive drooling and foaming at the mouth. This type of rabies,

called “vicious” rabies, ends in paralysis and death within several days. Some animals do not go through this vicious stage. Instead, they develop “dumb” rabies, which is a rapidly progressing paralysis that lasts three to five days and ends in death. A slack or “dropped” jaw is characteristic of dumb rabies.

What should I do if an animal bites me?

Wash the bite wound with soap and water for at least 15 minutes as soon as possible after the bite. Seek medical assistance/care or advice and relate the circumstances of the bite incident. The doctor will decide if treatment is required. If the doctor provides treatment, he/she will probably cleanse the wound further, provide antibiotics/tetanus immunization if needed, and assess the rabies risk. Also, contact the city public health department so staff can assist in getting animals quarantined or tested and help with other incident follow up.

What should be done with the biting animal?

Try to capture it. If successful, pen or cage the animal where other animals or people cannot come in contact with it. If the suspect animal cannot be captured, it should be killed but **DO NOT** shoot it in the head. The head of the suspect animal should be removed by a veterinarian and the brain examined for rabies at a laboratory. If the biting animal is a pet (non-stray) cat, dog, or ferret, health officials will probably require the animal to be quarantined.

How long should the animal be confined for observation?

Dogs, cats, and ferrets should be confined for ten days. If the animal had rabies at the time of biting, it will show signs of rabies and/or die within the ten days. Stray or wild animals are killed immediately and the brain examined for rabies.

Is there a cure for rabies?

No. Once the symptoms of rabies appear, death usually follows in a few days. However, rabies in humans can be prevented by the administration of post exposure prophylaxis or PEP. This consists of one dose of immune globulin and five doses of rabies vaccine over a 28-day period. Rabies immune globulin and the first dose of rabies vaccine should be given by your health care provider as soon as possible after exposure. Current vaccines are relatively painless and are given in your arm, like an influenza or tetanus immunization. Individuals who have previously received a complete vaccination regimen should not receive immune globulin and should receive only two doses of vaccine three days

apart. There have been no vaccine failures in the U.S. (i.e., someone developed rabies) when PEP was given promptly and appropriately after an exposure.

How can I protect my pet from rabies?

There are several things you can do to protect your pet from rabies. First, visit your veterinarian with your pet on a regular basis and keep rabies vaccinations up-to-date for all cats, ferrets, and dogs. Second, maintain control of your pets by keeping cats and ferrets indoors and keeping dogs under direct supervision. Third, spay or neuter your pets to help reduce the number of unwanted pets that may not be properly cared for or vaccinated regularly. Lastly, call animal control to remove all stray animals from your neighborhood since these animals may be unvaccinated or ill.

Why does my pet need rabies vaccine?

Although the majority of rabies cases occur in wildlife, most humans are given rabies vaccine as a result of exposure to domestic animals. While wildlife are more likely to be rabid than are domestic animals, the amount of human contact with domestic animals greatly exceeds the amount of contact with wildlife. Your pets and other domestic animals can be infected when they are bitten by rabid wild animals. When "spillover" rabies occurs in domestic animals, the risk to humans is increased. Pets are therefore vaccinated by your veterinarian to prevent them from acquiring the disease from wildlife, and thereby transmitting it to humans. In Missouri, rabies vaccine can be legally given only by a licensed veterinarian.

For more information on Animal Bites, call (816) 325-7204

Report animal bites and bats in your home or apartment to Animal Control at (816) 325-7205

For additional copies, visit our website at <http://www.ci.independence.mo.us/Health/>

For more information on rabies prevention, refer to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's "Rabies – Questions and Answers" at <http://www.cdc.gov/rabies/index.html> (18 August 2014)