Rabies- Factsheet

What is rabies?

Rabies is a disease transmitted from animals to humans. Only mammals can get or transmit rabies (not birds, fish, reptiles, etc.). The most common wild animals with rabies are bats, skunks, foxes, and raccoons. Rodents and rabbits are very unlikely to have rabies. Unvaccinated domestic animals such as dogs, cats, ferrets, and livestock may also become infected.

What are the symptoms of rabies?

Rabies can be prevented with vaccination and rabies post-exposure prophylaxis. Once symptoms begin, however, there is no cure or treatment. Symptomatic rabies is almost always fatal.

- In humans, the symptoms of rabies begin as a flu-like illness which quickly progresses to anxiety, confusion and agitation.
- In animals, symptoms of rabies vary greatly but can include behavioral changes, staggering, weakness, paralysis, seizures, aggression, and drooling.

How is rabies spread?

Rabies is almost always spread through the bite of an infected animal. It could also be spread by infectious material, such as saliva, coming into contact with mucous membranes (e.g. eyes, nose, mouth) or a cut in the skin. Rare cases of transmission through organ and tissue transplants have been reported. There has never been a documented case of human-to-human rabies transmission. Only the saliva and neural tissue of a rabid animal are infectious: rabies is not transmitted through contact with blood, urine, feces, fur, or skunk spray.

How long are people or animals contagious?

People providing care to a person with symptomatic rabies should use precautions to avoid contact with infectious material such as saliva.

People who have been in contact with a potentially rabid animal should consult with a healthcare provider and NMDOH to assess risk. Often testing or monitoring the biting animal is better than beginning post-exposure prophylaxis right away. An animal with signs of rabies will die within a few days.

Who gets rabies?

Human rabies cases are extremely rare in the United States. Most people who have contracted rabies in the U.S. were bitten by a rabid animal and did not tell a health care provider or get post-exposure prophylaxis. Anyone who has been bitten by a potentially rabid animal should consult with a health care provider and NMDOH to assess the need for post-exposure prophylaxis. Before international travel, people should consult with a health care provider to see whether rabies vaccines are recommended for their destination.

Unvaccinated pets and livestock are at risk of contracting rabies. All dogs, cats, and ferrets must be vaccinated against rabies. Valuable livestock and animals that have frequent contact with humans (e.g. in petting zoos, fairs, etc.) should be vaccinated against rabies.

What treatment is available for people with rabies?

Once symptoms begin, rabies is almost always fatal. However, appropriate post-exposure prophylaxis is virtually 100% effective.

There is no rabies treatment or post-exposure prophylaxis for animals.

Do infected people need to be kept home from school, work or daycare?

A person with symptomatic rabies would be too sick to go to school, work, or daycare. People who have been bitten by a potentially rabid animal should consult a healthcare provider and NMDOH but may go about their lives as usual. People who are undergoing post-exposure prophylaxis may also proceed as normal.

Why monitor a dog, cat, or ferret that has bitten a person for 10 days instead of immediately testing the animal or beginning post-exposure prophylaxis?

Animals cannot transmit rabies unless the virus is present in saliva. Virus is usually only present in the saliva of an infected dog, cat, or ferret once signs of rabies begin, or at maximum three to four days before. If a dog, cat, or ferret remains healthy at the end of a 10-day quarantine period there is no risk of rabies transmission to the bite victim and unnecessary post-exposure prophylaxis can be avoided. No person in the United States has ever contracted rabies from a dog, cat, or ferret held in quarantine for 10 days. If a dog, cat, or ferret shows signs of illness at the time of the bite or during quarantine, it should be evaluated by a veterinarian and may be tested for rabies.

How can I protect myself and my family from getting rabies?

- Vaccinate all dogs, cats, and ferrets against rabies as required by law. Also vaccinate valuable livestock and livestock that have frequent contact with humans. Animals who seem sick or start behaving strangely should be evaluated by a veterinarian.
- Do not approach wildlife or unknown animals.
- Consult your doctor or NMDOH if you have any contact with a bat, or if a bat is found in the same room as a sleeping or incapacitated individual, or a young child.
- Animal bites should be irrigated with clean water for several minutes and thoroughly cleaned with soap.
- Report all bites from dogs, cats, ferrets, or rabies-susceptible wildlife to local animal control. Consult with a health care provider and NMDOH to assess the appropriateness of having the animal tested or quarantined or beginning the patient on rabies post-exposure prophylaxis.
- International travelers should consult a health care provider to find out what vaccinations are recommended for their destination.
- People in high-risk professions (e.g. certain laboratory employees, those who work with wildlife, wild animal rehabilitators, veterinarians, animal control personnel) should receive rabies pre-exposure prophylaxis.