

# RABIES



## What is rabies?

Rabies is a viral disease affecting the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord). It is transmitted from infected mammals to man and is almost always fatal once symptoms appear. Fortunately, only a few human cases are reported each year in the United States.

## Who gets rabies?

All warm blooded mammals including man can get rabies. Among wild animals, rabies is most often seen in raccoons, bats, skunks and foxes.

## How do people get rabies?

People can get rabies if they are exposed to the saliva or nervous tissue of a rabid animal through a bite or scratch. Although rare, exposure can also occur if infected saliva or nervous tissue gets into a fresh wound (one that has bled within 24 hours) or mucous membrane (eyes, nose, mouth). There have also been a few cases of person-to-person transmission in corneal and solid organ transplant recipients when it was not known that donors were infected with rabies.

## What should I do if I am exposed to rabies?

Wash all wounds thoroughly with soap and water and seek medical attention immediately.

Report all animal bites to the Macomb County Animal Shelter, even if they seem minor.

Try to keep track of the animal that exposed you and report his information to the Macomb County Animal Shelter so the animal can be captured safely, if possible. In the case of a bat, you may be able to safely capture it yourself and take it to the Macomb County Animal Shelter, where it will be transferred to the state for rabies testing.

Healthy dogs, cats, ferrets and livestock that have bitten or otherwise caused a potential human exposure to rabies will be confined under the direction of the Macomb County Animal Shelter, and observed for ten days following the exposure. If the animal remains healthy during this period, the animal did not transmit rabies at the time of the bite.

Other types of animals that cause a potential human exposure must be tested for rabies under the direction of the Macomb County Animal Shelter. If an animal cannot be observed or tested for rabies, treatment may be necessary for the people exposed. The Macomb County Health Department can assist you and your physician to determine whether treatment is necessary.

## Can people be exposed to rabies and not know it?

Bats have small, sharp teeth that may not leave a visible puncture wound or noticeable pain at the bite site, therefore it is possible to be bitten without knowing it as described in the following scenarios. These scenarios indicate a reasonable probability that an exposure could have occurred:

- contact between a person's bare skin and the bat's head (or any part of the bat while not looking directly at the bat)
- bat found in a room with a sleeping person
- bat found in a room with an unattended child
- in some circumstances, bat found close to an unattended child outdoors
- bat found in a room with a person under the influence of alcohol or drugs or with other sensory or mental impairment

## **What should be done if a bat is found indoors?**

If the bat is found in any scenarios indicating reasonable probability of exposure, as listed above, it should be captured and tested for rabies. To avoid losing the bat, leave one person in the room watching it with doors and windows closed, while another person goes to get a coffee can, lid, gloves, or similar equipment to capture it. The Macomb County Animal Shelter may also be contacted for advice on how to capture the bat and submit it for rabies testing. If it is certain the bat did not have contact with a person or pet, the bat can be allowed to leave through an open window. Do not exit the room until you observe the bat leaving through the window. Close the window when the bat leaves.

## **What are the symptoms of rabies?**

Early symptoms include irritability, headache, fever and sometimes itching or pain at the site of exposure. Within days, the disease progresses to paralysis, spasms of the throat muscles, convulsions, delirium and death.

## **How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?**

The incubation period (time between exposure to the virus and the start of symptoms) is variable but is normally two to eight weeks. Incubation periods of over one year have been reported.

## **What is the treatment for rabies?**

First, the wound should be washed with lots of soap and water. Treatment consists of one dose of rabies immune globulin (dosage dependent on body weight) and four doses of rabies vaccine given on days 0, 3, 7, and 14 after exposure. The rabies immune globulin should be given as soon as possible after exposure. The full amount should be put into the wound, if possible. The first dose of vaccine should be given at the same time but in a different site, usually in the upper arm.

## **What happens if a rabies exposure goes untreated?**

Exposure to a rabid animal does not always result in rabies. If treatment is obtained promptly following a rabies exposure, most cases of rabies will be prevented. Untreated cases will invariably result in death.

## **What can be done to protect a pet from rabies?**

All cats, dogs and ferrets should be vaccinated against rabies. After that they should be placed on a schedule, depending on the vaccine used, for regular booster shots.

## **Why is pet vaccination important?**

Pet vaccination is important because vaccinated pets act as a barrier between wild animals and people to keep the rabies virus from spreading.

## **What should be done if a vaccinated pet fights with another animal?**

Any time your pet fights with a wild animal, or another pet, contact the Macomb County Animal Shelter for advice on what to do. Even though your pet has been vaccinated, a booster dose of rabies vaccine may be needed. If your pet fought with a known or suspect rabid animal this will keep your pet from getting rabies as a result of the current incident.

## **What can be done to prevent the spread of rabies?**

Exposure to rabies may be minimized by:

- removing all stray dogs and cats
- having all pets vaccinated and keeping them up-to-date on their vaccinations
- avoiding contact with all wild animals, especially those acting abnormally.

For more information, go to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov) and search the disease you are interested in their *A to Z Index* in the blue bar at the top of the page.