



Frequently asked questions about Rabies

From the Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency

What is rabies? Rabies is a virus that attacks the brain and nervous system. The rabies virus lives in the saliva of infected animals. It is usually spread from animal to animal or from animal to human. If left untreated in humans, rabies is fatal.

How is rabies spread? Bites, scratches, and contact with infected saliva are considered to be the most common ways that rabies is spread (also called “exposure” to rabies). Dogs and cats also contract rabies from infected animals, such as bats.

What animals are most often infected with rabies? In the United States, skunks, raccoons, foxes, coyotes, and bats are some of the most common wildlife carriers of rabies. However, **humans have the greatest chance of being infected with the rabies virus through contact with bats and unvaccinated cats, dogs.**

What are the symptoms of rabies? The symptoms of rabies include loss of consciousness, fever, headache, anxiety, insomnia, hyper-salivation (foaming at the mouth), and convulsions. Without medical attention, these symptoms appear within 20 to 60 days. Once a person begins to experience rabies symptoms, death usually follows.

What should be done following exposure to rabies? If you think you have been bitten or exposed to an animal (domestic or wild) that you suspect has rabies, **don’t wait.** Go to the nearest hospital emergency room or medical professional as soon as possible. Even though an animal may seem normal, it can still carry the rabies virus. Following exposure, the only way to avoid rabies’ deadly symptoms is to get medical attention immediately.

How can rabies be prevented? As soon as possible after being bitten, treatment should begin – prior to rabies symptoms appearing – even if the animal is merely suspected of having rabies; **CONSULT A MEDICAL PROFESSIONAL IMMEDIATELY!**

What is the treatment schedule? Rabies post-exposure vaccinations consists of a dose of human rabies immune globulin and four doses of rabies vaccine given on the day of the exposure, and then again on days 3, 7, and 14. The vaccine is given in a muscle, usually in the upper arm. This set of vaccinations is highly effective at preventing rabies if given as soon as possible following an exposure. If a person has previously received post-exposure vaccinations or received pre-exposure vaccinations, only two doses of vaccine (on the day of exposure and then 3 days later) are needed. Human rabies immune globulin is not required. Your doctor and local health department will be able to guide you through the process.

Does the rabies vaccine have side effects? There are risks associated with all vaccines. Some people experience local reactions, including pain, redness, swelling and itching at the injection site; headache, nausea, abdominal pain, muscle aches, and dizziness may also occur. If you have questions or concerns about the side effects associated with the rabies vaccine, you should talk to your doctor or health care professional.

Other Rabies do's and don'ts

- After a bite, unless an animal is exhibiting signs or symptoms of disease, is highly aggressive, or cannot safely or correctly be confined, DO NOT euthanize (kill) a suspect dog, cat, or ferret until after the 10 day observation period. This will avoid putting a person bitten through the rabies vaccine series if not indicated.
- Any animal bitten or scratched by either a wild, carnivorous mammal or a bat that is not available for testing should be regarded as having been exposed to rabies. Unvaccinated dogs, cats, and ferrets exposed to a rabid animal should be euthanized immediately. If the owner is unwilling to have this done, the animal should be placed in strict isolation for 6 months and vaccinated 1 month before being released. Animals with expired vaccinations need to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Dogs and cats that are currently vaccinated are kept under observation for 45 days.
- Upon a bite from a wild animal (bat, fox, raccoon, skunk, coyote, bobcat, and other carnivores (meat eaters) regard the animal as rabid and follow and complete the vaccine schedule.
- DO NOT attempt to “catch” a wild and/or aggressive animal. Call 911 who will contact animal control for help.
- Should there be an instance where an animal is killed without professional care, it is important to remember that an animal’s brain is tested for rabies and must be intact for accurate testing. If a dead animal is being sent in for testing, the Michigan Department of Community Health has strict guidelines for preparing and submitting specimens. Contact your veterinarian and the local Health Department for assistance.
- Even though your dog, cat, or ferret is vaccinated against rabies, the animal must still be held for the ten day observation period because of the potential for vaccine failure (in other words, the vaccine your animal received may not have been effective).
- Do not, under any circumstances, “adopt” a wild animal as a pet.
- If a bat or animal head is being “held” until arrangements can be made with the local public Health Department, please keep it in the refrigerator, NOT the freezer.

To learn more about rabies and rabies prevention, ask your doctor or health professional. You can also visit the following web site: www.cdc.gov/rabies. For more information on many other health topics, visit our website at www.bhsj.org or stop by one of our three local offices.

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