



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? Two shots are required initially. Rabies immune globulin and your first rabies vaccine will be given the first day. If warranted, a tetanus shot will also be given. Four additional rabies vaccines will be given over the next 4 weeks. **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.

To learn more about rabies and rabies prevention, ask your doctor or health professional. You can also visit the following web sites:

www.rabies.com

www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/rabies/introduction/intro.htm

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, I repeat, 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.
- An animal **with** symptoms should be killed immediately and tested. If at anytime during rabies treatment the test for rabies comes back negative, there is NO need to complete the schedule.
- 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.
- A crossbreed (a dog that is part wolf) is considered a wild animal and is treated as such when a bite occurs, regardless of the vaccine status.
- 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.

For more information on rabies and many other health topics, visit our website at

www.bhsj.org

Or call your local Health Department office at:

Coldwater
279-9561 x 143

Hillsdale
437-7395 x 110

Sturgis
659-4013 x 200

Three Rivers
273-2161 x 241

Your community partner in public health