



THE FACTS: *Rabies*

What is rabies?

Rabies is a rare 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.

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).

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, ensure the door and windows to the room are closed, while you are able to find a coffee can, lid, gloves, or similar equipment to capture it. 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.

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 occur?

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 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 should I do if I am bitten or scratched by an animal?

Contact the Health Unit and your family doctor if you have been bitten or scratched by an animal. Basic first aid of the wound should be initiated. Allow the wound to bleed freely and then wash area with soap and water for at least 5 minutes.

What is the post-exposure treatment for rabies?

Treatment consists of one dose of rabies immune globulin (dosage dependent on body weight) and five doses of rabies vaccine given on days 0, 3, 7, 14 and 28 after exposure.

How is post-exposure treatment decided?

If the animal involved in the biting incident cannot be found and observed for a period of at least 10 days, a visit to your nearest Emergency Department would be warranted. During that visit the possible need for treatment would be discussed. A copy of the **Ministry of Health and Long Term Care Guidelines for Management of Suspected Rabies Exposure** would be provided to you to aid the physician in the risk assessment process to evaluate if you are a candidate for the vaccine. Ultimately, your physician in consultation with you will determine the need for treatment and the physician will order the vaccine through the Thunder Bay District Health Unit.

What can be done to protect a pet from rabies?

All cats, dogs and ferrets should be vaccinated against rabies starting at three months of age and again one year later. After that they should be placed on a one or three year schedule, depending on the vaccine used, for regular booster shots. Pet vaccination is important because vaccinated pets act as a barrier between wild animals and people to keep the rabies virus from spreading.

What will happen if my pet bites or scratches someone?

If an animal in your care has bitten or scratched a person, the Health Unit must be advised immediately. Once reported, a Public Health Inspector will contact you (the caretaker or owner of the animal) to find out if the animal had the rabies virus in its saliva at the time of the incident. An observation period of at least 10 days is needed. It should take 10 days or less for the virus to make an animal ill after it has reached the animal's saliva.

During this time:

- The animal must be isolated and confined.
- Only the person caring for the animal should be near the animal.
- Keep all other animals and people away.
- Do not allow the animal to run at large.
- Chain and/or fence in the animal when it's outside.
- The animal must not be destroyed, sold, or given away.
- It must be kept alive until it is released by a Public Health Inspector.

Should the animal become sick or die, the Health Unit **MUST** be notified immediately at 807-625-8318 or toll free at 1-888-294-6630. On weekends and after hours call Nurse's Registry at 807-623-7451 to reach an On-call Public Health Inspector. A Public Health Inspector will contact you towards the end of the 10-day period and arrange to release the animal. The inspector must see the animal to verify it is healthy and alive. These releases are done during the regular business week.

***For Further Information Contact the Infectious Disease Program at 625-8318
or toll free 1-888-294-6630, ext. 8318.***

