

Rabies

What is Rabies?

Rabies is a serious disease that is caused by a virus. The disease is contagious and affects the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord). Warm blooded animals can get the disease and pass it onto other. Once symptoms appear in humans and animals, it is fatal. An animal usually contracts rabies from the saliva (bite) of another animal that has the disease. Rabies is most often seen in wild animals such as raccoons, skunks, foxes and bats. It may also be seen in livestock and pets, such as dogs and cats.

How do people get Rabies?

The rabies virus may be spread to a human through a bite or scratch from an infected animal. It can also enter the human body through a break in the skin. In rare cases, exposure can also occur if infected saliva or nervous tissue gets into a fresh wound or mucous membranes, such as the eyes, nose and mouth. The most common period of time between exposure to the virus and the development of symptoms is 3-8 weeks, but this maybe as short as 9 days or as long as 7 years.

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.

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.

If the bat is found in any scenarios indicating reasonable probability of exposure, as listed above, or if you have been bitten by a bat contact your doctor and local health unit to speak with a public health inspector immediately. If possible, keep the bat for laboratory rabies testing. Never handle a bat without leather work gloves or put yourself at risk.

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.

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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 four doses of rabies vaccine given on days 0, 3, 7 and 14 after exposure. An additional dose is given on day 28 for immunocompromised persons according to the Canadian Immunization Guide.

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 risk assessment should be completed by the attending physician to determine the probable risk of exposure to rabies. If justified, 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 conduct a risk assessment of the incident. An observation period of at least 10 days is needed to rule out the possibility of the pet being rabid. 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 not be exposed to others it is not normally exposed to (human or animal)
- Do not allow the animal to run at large, chain and/or fence in the animal when it's outside.
- The animal must be leashed for walks, and not brought to off-leash parks.
- 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.

This fact sheet provides basic information only. It must not take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always talk to a health care professional about any health concerns.

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