

RABIES Q&A

What is rabies?

Rabies is a viral disease of mammals, usually occurring among wild animals such as raccoons, skunks, bats, and foxes. The rabies virus travels from the site of the bite up through the nerves until it reaches the brain, causing encephalopathy and ultimately death.

Which animals get rabies?

In the United States, rabies occurs primarily in wild mammals (e.g., skunks, raccoons, coyotes, foxes and bats). Sometimes, these wild animals infect domestic cats, dogs, and livestock. Rabies is rare in small rodents such as squirrels, rabbits, beavers, chipmunks, rats and mice, muskrats, hamsters, gerbils, porcupines and guinea pigs.

How is the rabies virus spread?

When an infected animal bites another animal the rabies virus is transmitted in the infected animal's saliva. Rarely, rabies is spread when infectious material from a rabid animal, such as saliva, comes into contact with mucus membranes such as the eyes, nose, mouth, or a wound.

What are the symptoms of rabies?

Early symptoms of rabies in humans are non-specific and may include fever, headache, and general malaise. Later, signs of encephalopathy such as insomnia, anxiety, confusion, paralysis, excitation, hallucinations, agitation, hypersalivation, difficulty swallowing, and hydrophobia (fear of water) may appear. Death usually occurs within days of the onset of symptoms.

It is a misconception that rabid animals are spotted easily because they drool and foam at the mouth. These symptoms may never occur or may occur only at the very last stages of the disease. Any non-domesticated or stray animal that acts abnormal should be suspected of having rabies. Rabid animals may stagger, appear restless, be aggressive, have difficulty walking, seem overly friendly, or appear to be choking.

How soon do symptoms appear after exposure?

The length of time between the bite and the symptoms of rabies depends on the strain of rabies virus, how much rabies virus was introduced into the wound, and the distance from the site of the bite to the brain. Usually, the incubation period is quite long and may be one to three months.

What is the treatment for rabies?

There is no known, effective treatment for rabies once the symptoms of the illness have developed. Rabies can be prevented in humans if medical care is sought soon after an exposure to the rabies virus. If left untreated, rabies is always deadly.

How can rabies be prevented?

Make certain that all owned dogs and cats are regularly vaccinated for rabies by a veterinarian. Teach children not to approach or play with wild or stray domestic animals of any kind. Tell them that even though a baby skunk or raccoon may look cute, it can spread very serious diseases. ***Love your own, leave other animals alone*** is a good principle for children to learn.

The rabies pre-exposure vaccine regimen is recommended for persons such as rabies research and laboratory workers, spelunkers, veterinarians, veterinary technicians, veterinary students, kennel workers, animal control and wildlife personnel, and taxidermists. People traveling to parts of the world where canine rabies is endemic should also consider the vaccine.

What should be done when a potentially rabid animal bites someone?

Thoroughly clean the wound immediately with soap and water to reduce the likelihood of

rabies transmission. Call your doctor as soon as possible for advice. Your doctor can consult with the Georgia Poison Center (404-616-9000 in Atlanta, or 800-282-5846 statewide) to decide whether post-exposure human rabies immune globulin (HRIG) and vaccine are recommended for this bite. Your doctor can also tell you if you need a tetanus booster or antibiotics. Provide your doctor with the following information:

1. Type of animal involved (pet or wild animal)
2. Provoked (teased, startled, run past, etc.) or unprovoked attack
3. Type of exposure (cut, scratch, licking of an open wound), part of the body, number of exposures
4. Animal's vaccination status (does not apply to wild animals)
5. Sick or well animal, type of symptoms
6. Animal available/not available for testing or quarantine

Under certain circumstances a domestic animal may be placed under quarantine and observed to see if it develops symptoms of rabies. Cats, dogs, and ferrets will become ill and expire within days of shedding the rabies virus in their saliva (the time of the bite).

Where can I get additional information about rabies?

The Georgia Poison Center is available for rabies consultation 24 hours a day, seven days a week (Atlanta 404-616-9000, statewide 800-282-5846). Information can also be obtained from local health departments and animal rabies control officers. The Division of Public Health, Epidemiology Branch, provides assistance in difficult or emergency cases (404-657-2588). The following websites may be helpful as well:

- CDC Rabies – <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/rabies/Introduction/intro.htm>
- WHO Rabies – <http://www.who.int/health-topics/rabies.htm>
- Georgia Poison Center – <http://www.georgiapoisoncenter.org/>

- Georgia Rabies Control Manual – <http://health.state.ga.us/epi/manuals/rabies/index.shtml>

