
Understanding Rabies

Rabies is a virus that infects the nerves and the brain. Any warm-blooded animal, including people, can get it. It's spread in the saliva of an infected animal. Rabies can be treated. Untreated rabies almost always results in death.

What causes rabies?

Infections occur when saliva or brain tissue from an infected animal enters another mammal's body. This can be through a bite or scrape that breaks the skin. In rare cases, infection can be spread through a mucous membrane, such as the eye or mouth.

In North America, raccoons, bats, foxes, and skunks are most likely to carry the rabies virus. Dogs, cats, and ferrets can also get rabies. Most states require companion animals to be vaccinated against rabies. The frequency of vaccination varies from state to state. But in states that require rabies vaccinations, there are no legal waivers. Because of this, pets don't pose a high risk for rabies in the U.S. This isn't the case in other parts of the world.

What are the symptoms of rabies?

In most cases, rabies symptoms start 1 to 3 months after exposure. But in some cases, they may not show up for more than a year. First symptoms may include:

- Feeling unwell.
- Weakness.
- Extreme tiredness (fatigue).
- Low-grade fever.
- Upset stomach (nausea) or vomiting.
- Headache.

Over many days to a few weeks, more symptoms may occur. These include tingling, itching, numbness, or a burning feeling where the bite occurred. **Talk with your health care provider right away if you think you have been exposed to rabies. By the time the following symptoms occur, the infection may be far advanced.** The end stages of rabies are almost always fatal. Symptoms at that point include:

- Restlessness and confusion.
- Anxiety.
- Agitation.
- Drooling.
- Pharyngeal muscle spasm to the sight, taste, or sound of water (hydrophobia).
- Pain when trying to drink.
- Muscle weakness.

- Numbness.
- Paralysis.

What to do

Here's what to do in the following situations:

- **You've been bitten or scratched by a bat or other wild animal.** Contact your health care provider right away.
- **You, a child, or someone else was in close contact with a bat or other wild animal. But you're not sure if a bite occurred.** This may be the case if the person is a child. Or if the person was sleeping. Or if the person has an intellectual disability, or has had a lot of alcohol, and a bat or other wild animal was found in the room. Contact your provider.
- **You've been bitten or scratched by a pet, and you don't know if it has had a rabies vaccine.** Contact your local animal control department or your local public health department. The animal will likely be confined with its owner for 10 days. If the animal doesn't get rabies in that time, you're not at risk of getting sick.

How is rabies treated?

Treatments focus on reducing the risk of getting rabies after a bite or scratch. They include:

- **Cleaning the wound thoroughly.** The risk of infection can be reduced by washing the bite or scratch with soap and water, or water and iodine.
- **Getting a series of shots to prevent rabies infection.** These are often given in the arm, like a flu shot. They include the rabies vaccine and the human rabies antibody to help your body fight the virus. This treatment can work even after rabies has entered the body. But not after symptoms begin.

What are the possible complications of rabies?

Rabies infections that aren't treated almost always result in death. By the time rabies symptoms appear, it's often too late for treatment to work. If you think you've been exposed to rabies, talk with your health care provider right away. They'll tell you if you should be treated.

How can you prevent rabies?

If you don't take unneeded risks, you don't need to be afraid of getting rabies. To prevent exposure:

- Don't handle wild animals or stray dogs or cats. Report strays and ill animals to animal control.
- Vaccinate your pets. Urge your neighbors to do the same.
- Try to limit your pets' exposure to wild animals.
- If you're traveling to other countries, ask your health care provider or a travel clinic about vaccines you should have.

When should you contact your doctor?

Contact your health care provider right away if you have any of these:

- A bite or scratch from a wild animal that has broken the skin. This might be from a raccoon or skunk.
- A bite or scratch from a pet animal that has broken the skin, and you can't be sure that it has had a current rabies vaccine.
- You or your child may have been scratched or bitten by a bat. Bites and scratches from bats may not be noticed, especially by children.