

## Rabies

### What is rabies and what causes it?

Rabies is a severely fatal viral disease that can affect all mammals, including humans. Infection results in damage to the nervous system and death. Rabies occurs worldwide. In the U.S. only 2 or 3 human cases of rabies occur each year and are usually associated with exposure to bats. In animals, over 7,000 cases are reported each year in the U.S., primarily in wildlife species such as raccoons, skunks, and bats.

### What animals get rabies?

All mammals can get rabies. In the U.S., wildlife species such as raccoons, skunks, foxes, and coyotes are the major reservoirs for the virus. Rabies in domestic animal species has been reported for dogs, cats, cattle, horses, but any mammal can get the disease if exposed to the virus. Bats are another important reservoir for rabies.

### How can my animal get rabies?

Rabies is most commonly spread by the bite (**direct contact**) of an infected animal whose saliva contains the virus. It has also been spread between animals by the ingestion (**oral**) of unpasteurized milk. The virus is not thought to be spread by blood, urine or feces.

### How does rabies affect my animal?

Since the rabies virus affects the brain of animals, signs of rabies involve changes in behavior. Infected animals may show unusual aggression, friendliness or be fearful. Other signs include restlessness, paralysis of their legs, difficulty swallowing,

drooling and a change in the sound of their voice. They may overreact to stimuli such as noises or lights. Any animal infected with rabies will die in 7 to 10 days.

### Can I get rabies?

Yes. People can get rabies from the bite (**direct contact**) of an infected animal. Other less common routes of exposure include contact with the brain or spinal cord fluid of infected animal or inhaling virus **aerosolized** from infected tissues. A limited number of human cases have occurred from organ transplants.

In most human cases, signs of rabies do not develop until 1 to 3 months after exposure. Early symptoms include fever, headache, itching at the site of the bite, confusion and abnormal behavior. Infected people will be overstimulated by light and sounds and have difficulty swallowing. Once signs of disease begin, recovery is very rare and death usually occurs within 2 to 10 days. Fortunately, treatment before signs develop is highly effective and life-saving.



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is a severely fatal  
viral disease  
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Virus photo from Wadsworth Center of the New York State Department of Health.

### Who should I contact, if I suspect rabies?

**In Animals** – Contact your veterinarian immediately.

**In Humans** – Contact your physician immediately.

### How can I protect my animal from rabies?

Prevention is the best way to stop rabies. Animals should be vaccinated for rabies and kept away from wildlife. Bats caught by cats should be sent in for testing. Dogs, cats or ferrets that have bitten humans and show no signs of illness may be observed for rabies under veterinary supervision for 10 days. If signs of rabies develop during this time, the animal must be euthanized and tested.

### How can I protect myself from rabies?

Do not contact, handle or feed wildlife. Animals behaving abnormally (nocturnal animals wandering around in the daytime or wildlife acting exceptionally friendly) should especially be avoided. Do not pick up bats that are laying on the ground. If you are bitten by any animal, wash the wound well with soap and hot water. If you suspect rabies in the animal that bit you, contact your physician immediately, so post-exposure treatment can be started.

### For More Information

CFSPH Technical Fact Sheets. Rabies at <http://www.cfsph.iastate.edu/DiseaseInfo/>

CDC website. Rabies at [http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/submenu/sub\\_rabies.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/submenu/sub_rabies.htm)