



Indiana State Department of Health

Epidemiology Resource Center

Quick Facts

About...Rabies

What is rabies?

Rabies is a viral disease that infects the brain and spinal cord of mammals, including humans. It is almost always fatal.

How is rabies spread?

Rabies is spread by the bite of a rabid animal. Rabies virus may produce changes in animals that make them more likely to bite. This helps spread the virus. Rabies may also be spread when saliva comes in contact with an open wound, the eyes, or the mouth. A scratch could spread the disease if saliva is on an animal's claws.

Which animals can transmit rabies?

Indiana animals considered to be at highest risk of spreading rabies to humans include bats, skunks, foxes, and raccoons. Bats are the most common reported to have rabies. Dogs and cats can also spread rabies that they have caught from wildlife, but they are seldom found to be rabid in this state. Reptiles and birds never get rabies. Bites from rabbits, rats, mice, squirrels, chipmunks, and other small mammals rarely carry a risk of rabies.

Who is at risk for rabies?

Anyone who has had been exposed to a rabid animal may be at risk for getting rabies.

What are the symptoms of rabies in animals?

One of the first signs of rabies in an animal is a change in behavior. A calm animal may become aggressive, or a very active animal may seem depressed. Rabid wild

animals can lose their fear of humans, and nocturnal (active at night) animals might be seen during daylight hours.

In addition to different behavior, rabid animals can exhibit furious and/or paralytic ("dumb") rabies. Animals with furious rabies are aggressive and may attack other animals and even objects. *The furious stage does not occur in all rabid animals.* An animal with paralytic rabies seems to have trouble walking, is weak, and has a "dull" or "vacant" expression. Weakness will lead to paralysis and death.

What are the symptoms of rabies in humans?

The first sign of rabies in humans is often a general feeling of apprehension and itching or tingling at the site of the bite. Other signs of rabies in humans include headache, weakness, paralysis, and death. Swallowing is often impossible due to paralysis of the throat muscles.

How is rabies treated?

Once symptoms appear in humans, rabies cannot be cured. Rabies is almost always fatal. Therefore, efforts are focused to prevent exposure or provide vaccines that will prevent disease in those exposed.

How is rabies prevented?

You can avoid being exposed to rabies by doing the following:

- don't attempt to pet animals unknown to you;
- don't approach animals that are sleeping, injured, eating, or caring for young;
- avoid contact with wild animals; enjoy them from a distance
- prevent wildlife from entering your house, garage, storage sheds, or other enclosed areas;
- don't leave pet food out where it will attract wildlife;
- keep garbage containers closed and secure; and
- HAVE YOUR PETS VACCINATED AGAINST RABIES – a vaccinated pet is a barrier between you and rabid wildlife

If you are exposed to rabies, the disease can be prevented with immunization. Individuals who are in high-risk jobs (veterinarians, wildlife workers/rehabilitators, animal control officers, and rabies laboratory workers) should be immunized with rabies vaccine before working with animals. In some circumstances, international travelers should also be immunized against rabies before travel.

Rabies can also be prevented by getting a vaccine after an exposure has happened but before symptoms develop (post-exposure prophylaxis). When given properly, post-exposure prophylaxis has been effective in preventing rabies in humans bitten by known or suspected rabid animals.

What should I do if an animal bites me?

If an animal bites you, there are a few simple steps you can take:

- Wash the wound with lots of soap and running water;
- Go to a doctor or emergency room if the bite is severe or bleeding;
- Tell your doctor that an animal bit you;
- Make sure you have a current tetanus vaccine;
- Take antibiotics if your doctor tells you to;
- If possible and without causing more injury, try to identify or capture the biting animal; and
- Tell your local health department or animal control agency. The animal may need to be tested or quarantined.

All information presented is intended for public use. For more information, please refer to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website on rabies:

<http://www.cdc.gov/rabies/>

Indiana State Department of Health Rabies Education website:

<http://www.in.gov/isdh/20518.htm>

Your local health department is an excellent source of general information on rabies, the occurrence of rabies in your county, the risk of rabies following an animal bite, and options for observation or testing of biting animals.

Your veterinarian can advise you on how to protect your pets.

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