

RABIES: What is it?



WHAT IS RABIES?

Rabies is a viral infection spread through infected saliva. It is usually transmitted through a bite. In developing countries, rabies in dogs accounts for more than 90% of all cases. In North America and Europe, it is most commonly found in wild animals such as, skunks, raccoons, muskrats, foxes and bats. Most often these wild animals are what infect our pets and livestock. Rarely is rabies found in small rodents such as chipmunks, squirrels, rabbits, gerbils or hamsters.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF RABIES?

The time from when someone gets bitten and the symptoms of rabies occurs varies widely. Typically it takes between 30 and 90 days, however it can range from 5 days to more than 2 years.

Symptoms may start with:

- Fevers, chills, and general feeling of illness
- Vague respiratory, gastrointestinal, and neurological symptoms
- Paresthesia (tingling) at the bite site

The rabies victim then develops one of two forms of rabies symptoms. About 80% of people experience the furious form.

Furious Form

- Hallucinations, agitation
- Thrashing, biting, running
- Hydrophobia (fear of water) / Aerophobia (fear of drafts of air)
- Changing mental status

Paralytic Form

- Weakness
- Paralysis

In both forms you will also experience:

- Fever
- Convulsions
- Coma
- Death

WHAT IS THE TREATMENT FOR RABIES?

After getting bitten, immediately wash the wound with soap and water for at least 10 minutes. If your medical provider feels you had a rabies exposure, you will be treated with a series of shots. These shots will provide you with immunity to the disease if given immediately after an exposure. Unfortunately, there is no known effective treatment for rabies once symptoms appear.

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WHAT DEFINES AN “EXPOSURE?”

An exposure requires:

1. Presence of infective virus
 - a. Typically in saliva, however it can be neural tissue or cerebral spinal fluid
 - b. Contact with blood, urine, or feces DOES NOT count as an exposure
 - c. Rabies virus is considered noninfectious if it is found in dried material
2. The potentially infectious material must come into contact with an open wound, scratch, abrasion, or mucosal (e.g. eyes, mouth, nose) surface

Most exposures occur through a bite; however you can get the disease by coming into contact with infected saliva through a scratch or at the site of a mucous membrane.

Be extra cautious with bat exposures. The bite from a bat is so small; often times people don't even realize they've been bitten. If you've been very close to a bat and cannot exclude the possibility of being bitten or scratched, seek treatment.

Wound inflicted by canine teeth of *Big brown bat* while bat was being handled;
picture taken same day as bite



Sources: WI Division of Public Health and the University of Maryland Medical Center (1/09).