

RABIES

Frequently Asked Questions

What is rabies?

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

Which animals get rabies?

In Georgia, rabies occurs primarily in wild mammals (e.g., raccoons, skunks, foxes, and bats). Sometimes, these wild animals bite and infect domestic cats, dogs, and livestock. Rabies is rare in larger rodents and lagomorphs such as squirrels, beavers, porcupines, guinea pigs, and rabbits. Although small rodents such as chipmunks, rats, mice, muskrats, hamsters, and gerbils are susceptible to rabies, it has not been reported in these species under natural conditions.

How is the rabies virus spread?

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

In some cases, it can be difficult to determine whether a person or animal has been bitten by a bat. Consequently, if a person or animal has physical contact with a bat, or may have had physical contact while in the same room with a bat (e.g., while the person is sleeping), and the bat is not available for rabies testing, a health care provider should be consulted to determine the risk of rabies transmission.

What are the symptoms of rabies in humans?

Early symptoms of rabies in humans are non-specific and may include fever, headache, tingling or numbing sensation in limbs, and general malaise. Later, signs of encephalopathy such as insomnia, anxiety, confusion, excitation, hallucinations, agitation, hypersalivation, difficulty



swallowing, and hydrophobia (fear of water) may appear. Death usually occurs within days of the onset of symptoms.

What are the symptoms of rabies in animals?

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 wild 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 and post-exposure prophylaxis is sought soon after an exposure to the rabies virus. If left untreated, rabies is always fatal.

Can the rabies virus live outside of a rabid animal?

The virus is very fragile and is no longer infectious once the saliva dries. The virus can be killed easily with soaps, detergents, bleach, alcohol, and ultraviolet light.

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 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 others alone” is a good principle for children to learn. Also, do not touch dead animals and keep wild animals out of homes and workplaces.



The rabies pre-exposure vaccine regimen is recommended for persons at increased risk of rabies 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 800-222-1222 statewide) or the Epidemiology Branch (404-657-2588) 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 for the bite wound. Provide your doctor with the following information:

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

What should happen to the animal if it bites someone?

Under certain circumstances a domestic animal may be placed under 10-day 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.)

If the animal is wild or stray it should be humanely destroyed and the brain should be sent for testing. Your local Animal Control or Environmental Health Department can provide assistance with quarantine or rabies testing of animals that have bitten you. Physicians and veterinarians and/or the Epidemiology Branch should be consulted about bites from livestock.



What should be done if a pet or livestock fights and/or is bitten by a wild animal or an animal suspected of having rabies?

If the animal that bit the pet can be captured, submit the brain for testing. If the animal is negative and your pet is not vaccinated, get your pet vaccinated.

If the animal tests positive and your pet is current on the rabies vaccine, talk with a veterinarian about a booster shot. Also, monitor your pet for 45 days after the booster for any symptoms of rabies.

If the animal tests positive and your pet is unvaccinated or does not have a complete vaccination history, the recommendation is to euthanize the pet or to keep the pet in strict isolation for six months. The management of animals potentially exposed to rabies should be coordinated with local Animal Control or local Environmental Health.

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 800-222-1222). Information can also be obtained from local health departments and animal control officers. The Department 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/rabies/>
- WHO Rabies – <http://www.who.int/topics/rabies/en/>
- Georgia Poison Center – <http://www.georgiapoisoncenter.org/>

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