

Rabies: Frequently Asked Questions

What is rabies?

Rabies is a serious disease caused by a virus that affects mammals, including humans. Sick animals can pass the disease on through their saliva, either by biting, or through direct contact between saliva and broken skin or mucus membranes. The rabies virus can then travel through nerves, and into the brain where it causes inflammation. Symptoms appear once the virus has reached the brain, and when an animal or human shows symptoms of rabies, the disease is fatal.

Which animals can get rabies?

All mammals, including humans, can become infected with the rabies virus. Wild animals that are most at risk include bats, raccoons, skunks, foxes, groundhogs, coyotes, bobcats, beavers, fishers, minks, otters, muskrats, and wolves. Domestic animals and pets can also be infected, such as dogs, cats, ferrets, horses, and cows. Rodents and rabbits are much less likely to carry rabies, and birds, reptiles, amphibians, and fish cannot become infected.

What types of rabies are there in Nova Scotia?

There are different strains of rabies, like bat rabies and raccoon rabies. In Nova Scotia, bats are the only animals that routinely carry the virus. To date, raccoon rabies has not been found in Nova Scotia, although it is found in New Brunswick and other areas in Ontario and the United States.

Is raccoon rabies more dangerous than bat rabies?

The disease itself is the same, but if raccoon rabies did come to Nova Scotia, people and pets might be more likely to come into contact with rabies because raccoons like to live near homes and farms. However, you would most likely notice if you were bitten by a raccoon, because of the large wound. With bats, because of their small teeth, you may not notice if you had been bitten – especially if you were asleep. Because of this, it is a good idea to contact your doctor and public health officials if you find a bat in a room where a person has been sleeping, or where a child, mentally challenged, or intoxicated person has been left alone.

What are the symptoms of rabies in animals?

It is impossible to tell for sure if an animal has rabies without doing a laboratory test. Animals that are sick with rabies may have strange behaviour. They may be unusually aggressive, trying to attack and bite people or other animals. Some animals that usually stay away from people might have a change in behaviour and seem unusually friendly. They might look sick and have trouble walking, or a bat might have trouble flying. Animals that have rabies in their system may also seem healthy but are still able to spread the infection before they get symptoms.

An animal has bitten me. Do I need a rabies shot?

You should wash the wound with soapy water for at least five minutes and seek medical attention immediately. A physician or other health care professional will assess the risk of rabies transmission in consultation with Public Health Services and determine if you need rabies post-exposure treatment. If your pet is bitten by a wild animal or bat, or by another animal that is behaving strangely, you should bring it to the vet immediately.

What kind of contact with an animal can give someone rabies?

The rabies virus is contained in the saliva of an infected animal, as well as in its brain, spinal cord, and nerves. A bite from an infected animal can spread rabies, and so can direct contact between saliva and skin that is broken (for example small cuts) or mucus membranes (around the eyes, mouth and nose). Exposure to an infected animal's brain or spinal cord, such as may occur in a laboratory during testing, can also spread rabies.

What happens if I have been exposed to rabies?

Once a person or animal has symptoms of rabies, the disease is always fatal. Fortunately, human rabies is very rare in Canada, and treatment protocols given after a bite or other exposure ("post-exposure prophylaxis") are very effective as long as they are given before any symptoms develop. This treatment involves injections of rabies antibody and a series of rabies vaccine, which can be administered by your doctor or nurse in consultation with Public Health Services.

Should I get a preventative rabies vaccine before being exposed?

Public Health recommends that people who are at higher risk of being exposed to rabies, like vets, animal control officers, and trappers, get the vaccine before being exposed to rabies. The general public does not require routine rabies vaccination.

What can I do to reduce the risk of rabies?

There are several things you can do to reduce your risk of getting rabies. Vaccinate your pets, and don't let them roam free. "Bat-proof" your house and cottage, and discourage raccoons from coming near your home and animals. Stay far away from bats and wild animals and teach your children to do the same. Do not touch or pick up an animal that looks sick – instead call the humane society. Finally, in the case of a potential exposure, seek medical attention immediately.

How many people die from rabies each year?

The number of deaths due to rabies in North America is extremely low. In Canada and the United States, there is an average of one to two deaths every year. This is in part due to the extremely effective human rabies vaccine and immune globulin that are given following an exposure to a potentially rabid animal, but especially due to pet vaccination which protects humans – people should ensure that their pets obtain regular rabies vaccinations, and try to keep their pets away from wild animals.

How can I reduce my exposure to bats?

To "bat-proof" your home, you may wish to contact a professional pest control company. If you choose to do it yourself, here are some suggestions. Most bats leave in the fall or winter to hibernate, so these are the best times make the changes. During summer, many young bats are unable to fly. If you exclude adult bats during this time, the young may be trapped inside and die, or make their way into living quarters.

Carefully examine your home for holes that might allow bats entry into your living quarters. Any openings larger than a quarter-inch by a half-inch should be caulked. Use window screens, chimney caps, and draft-guards beneath doors to attics, fill electrical and plumbing holes with stainless steel wool or caulking, and ensure that all doors to the outside close tightly.

Additional “bat-proofing” can prevent bats from roosting in attics or buildings by covering outside entry points. Observe where the bats exit at dusk and exclude them by loosely hanging clear plastic sheeting or bird netting over these areas. Bats can crawl out and leave, but cannot re-enter. After the bats have been excluded, the openings can be permanently sealed. If there are large numbers of bats residing in living spaces, contact a local animal control agency to help with removal.

Where can I get more information about rabies?

There are some Canadian websites with information about rabies. These include, www.inspection.gc.ca , and www.gov.on.ca. You may also wish to contact Public Health Services in your area with specific questions.