

Rabies

COMMUNICABLE DISEASE CONTROL

Rabies is caused by an infection with the rabies virus. The virus is carried in the saliva (spit) of an infected (rabid) animal. People usually get infected after a rabid animal bites them. Rabies can also be spread when infected animal saliva gets into a cut, wound or mucous membrane (ex: lining of the mouth, nose or eyes).

The disease affects the nervous systems of both human beings and animals. Human symptoms include headache, fever, increasing difficulty swallowing, excessive drooling, muscle spasm or weakness, and strange behaviour. *Once a person develops symptoms of rabies, the disease is almost always fatal.*

Who gets infected?

Humans and warm-blooded animals including pets (ex: cats, dogs, ferrets), farm animals (ex: cows, horses) and wild animals (ex: skunks, foxes) can get infected. Bats can also carry rabies.

How do people and animals get infected?

Humans, like animals, get rabies after being bitten or scratched by an infected animal. The infected animal may or may not show symptoms of rabies. In Manitoba, the common striped skunk often carries rabies and passes it on to farm animals and pets.

Is there a cure?

No, if rabies develops there is no cure. However, the disease can be prevented by rabies vaccine and rabies immune globulin (RIG). These medications must be given as soon as possible after exposure to an animal that is known or suspected to carry rabies, to prevent the disease from developing. Your health care provider or public health nurse will give you information about these medications if they are recommended for you or a member of your family.

How can you tell if an animal has rabies?

Animals with rabies often act in strange ways. For example, they may attack without a reason. Symptoms of rabies in animals include paralysis (muscle weakness), especially of the hind legs and throat. Household pets may seem aggressive, depressed or lethargic. Wild animals may seem unusually friendly or aggressive. Night-roaming animals (particularly skunks) may wander about in daylight. Rabid bats often appear normal except for gradual weakening and a loss of flying ability.

What if you think you have come into contact with rabies?

- *Immediately wash the affected skin area* with soap and water for several minutes if you have been bitten or licked by an animal that may have rabies or an animal that may have been exposed to the rabies virus.
- If the animal's saliva is on your clothing, *wash it immediately* in hot, soapy water. This will reduce chances the virus can enter your body.
- Call your doctor or go to the nearest hospital emergency room *right away*. Your risk of rabies exposure must be assessed and appropriate treatment recommended.

It usually takes three to eight weeks for rabies to develop after a person is exposed to a rabid animal. However, the symptoms may appear as soon as five days afterwards to more than one year later. If you wait until symptoms appear, it is too late to start effective medical treatment.

How do I avoid rabies?

- Vaccinate your pets against rabies and keep their rabies immunizations up-to-date.
- Don't let your pets roam free outdoors, especially at night.
- Avoid contact with wildlife and do not handle wild animals. This includes not feeding wildlife. Appreciate them from a distance.
- Teach your children never to approach unfamiliar animals, even if they seem friendly or appear to be sick and in need of help.

If you find a bat, dead or alive, **do not touch it** with your bare hands. Do not let anyone around you touch it, either. If the bat is dead and no one has been exposed to it, dig a hole and bury it or dispose of the carcass by placing it in a plastic bag and then directly into a sealed garbage container. Make sure to wear disposable plastic gloves while doing this. Wash your hands with soap and water afterwards. If the bat is alive and no one has been exposed to it, contact your local veterinarian or animal control officer for advice. In both cases, if someone (including yourself) has been directly exposed to the bat, **follow the same steps** outlined on the previous page in the section "*What if you think you have come into contact with rabies?*".

What about pet exposures to rabies?

If you think your pet has been exposed to rabies from another animal, **isolate your pet** at once. Do not handle your pet. Fresh saliva from the rabid animal may be on its coat and put you at risk of getting infected.

Contact your veterinarian or animal control officer to find out what to do with your pet. During weekdays, the Animal Division of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) can also provide you information. The CFIA veterinarian or public health officials will recommend what to do with the animal. The CFIA may recommend that the pet be placed under quarantine or euthanized (put to sleep). If you think your pet has been exposed to rabies and it is a weekend, after-hours or during a statutory holiday, call Health Links-Info Santé (phone numbers below) for advice. Health Links-Info Santé will refer you to an appropriate person or organization to help you.

Do not kill animals suspected of carrying rabies by shooting them in the head as the animal's brain is needed to test for the presence of rabies.

For more information

If you need more information about rabies, call:

- Health Links-Info Santé at 788-8200 (in Winnipeg) or toll-free 1-888-315-9257
- Your local public health office
- Your local veterinary clinic
- Your local CFIA-federal veterinarian office (weekdays) at 204-983-2200

Available on the Internet:

- World Health Organization:
Rabies Fact Sheet
www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs099/en/
- Animal Health Care Information and Advice from Canadian Veterinarians
www.animalhealthcare.ca

Local Public Health Unit Stamp