

# Rabies Fact Sheet

## What is rabies?

Rabies is a deadly disease caused by a virus that attacks the nervous system. The virus is present in saliva and in the nervous tissue of a rabid animal.

## What animals can get rabies?

Rabies is most often found among wild mammals such as raccoons, bats, skunks and foxes. Cats, dogs, horses and livestock can also get rabies, if they are not vaccinated for their protection. Deer and large rodents, such as woodchucks, have been found rabid in areas affected by rabies.

Some animals *almost* never get rabies. These include rabbits, squirrels, chipmunks, rats, mice, guinea pigs, gerbils and hamsters. They can get rabies, but it *almost* never happens.

Other animals, such as birds, snakes, fish, turtles, lizards and insects, *never* get rabies.

## What are the signs of rabies in an animal?

The average incubation period of the virus is three weeks to 8 weeks, although periods of up to one year have been reported. The first sign of rabies is usually a change in the animal's behavior. It may become unusually aggressive or unusually tame. The animal may lose fear of people and natural enemies. It may become excited, irritable and snap at anything in its path. Or, it may appear affectionate and friendly. Staggering, convulsions, spitting, choking, frothing at the mouth and paralysis are sometimes noted. Many animals have a marked change in voice. The animal usually dies within one week after showing signs of rabies.

## How do people become exposed to rabies?

People usually get exposed to the rabies virus when an infected animal bites them. Exposure may also occur by a scratch inflicted by an infected animal, or if saliva enters an open cut or mucous membrane (nose, eyes, mouth). Many people have been exposed to the rabies virus by handling their pets after an attack and getting the saliva of the rabid animal on their hands.

## What should you do if think you have been exposed to rabies?

Wash the wound thoroughly with soap and water and seek medical attention *immediately*. Contact your doctor and your county health authority immediately. Try to capture the animal without damaging its head or risking further exposure.

If an apparently healthy domestic dog or cat bites a human, it must be captured, confined and observed daily for at least 10 days following the bite. If the animal remains healthy during this period, the animal did not transmit rabies at the time of the bite.

If a rabies-suspect biting animal cannot be observed or tested, or it tests positive for the virus, treatment must begin *immediately*. Human treatment consists of a dose of rabies-immune globulin administered as soon as possible after exposure. The first of five doses of rabies vaccine is given at the same time, with the remaining injections administered one at a time on days 3, 7, 14 and 28 following the initial injection.

People in high-risk occupations, such as veterinarians, wildlife biologists, wildlife rehabilitators, animal control officers and taxidermists, should consider obtaining a rabies pre-exposure vaccination, which consists of three injections of rabies vaccine in the arm. Boosters are generally required every two years, if the risk of contact continues. A vaccinated person later exposed to rabies must receive booster injections immediately after exposure.

### **What if my pet is exposed to a rabid animal?**

If your pet has been in a fight with another animal, wear gloves to handle it. Isolate your pet from other animals and people for several hours. Call your veterinarian right away. Vaccinated pets will need a booster dose of rabies vaccine within five days. Unvaccinated animals exposed to a known or suspected rabid animal must be confined for six months or humanely destroyed.

### **How can I protect my family from rabies?**

Do not feed, touch or adopt wild animals, stray dogs or cats.

Be sure your dogs and cats are up-to-date on their rabies vaccinations. Indiana state law requires a current vaccination for all cats, dogs and ferrets beginning at three months of age. Vaccinated pets serve as a buffer between rabid wildlife and humans. Protecting your pet also reduces your risk of exposure to rabies. Pets too young to be vaccinated should be kept indoors.

Keep family pets indoors at night. Don't leave them outside unattended or let them roam free.

Don't attract wild animals to your home or yard. Keep your property free of stored bird seed and other foods which may attract wildlife and strays. Feed pets indoors. Tightly cap or put away garbage cans. Board up openings in your attic, basement, porch or garage. Cap your chimney with screens.

Encourage children to tell an adult *immediately*, if they are bitten or scratched by any animal. Tell children not to touch any animal they do not know.

Report all animal bites or contact with wild animals to the county health office.

If a wild animal is on your property, let it wander away. Bring children and pets indoors and alert neighbors who are outside.