

About rabies

What is rabies and how do people get it?

Rabies is caused by a virus that affects the nervous system of mammals. The disease is typically spread from animals to people by a bite from a rabid animal. Rabies is a fatal disease; it cannot be treated once symptoms appear. Luckily, rabies can be effectively prevented by vaccination.

Which animals carry rabies in Minnesota?

In Minnesota, skunks and bats are the most common rabid animals. Domestic animals such as cattle, horses, dogs, cats, and ferrets generally become infected after contact with rabid skunks or wild carnivores. People are usually exposed to rabies by dogs and cats, livestock or bats.

Some animals almost never get rabies and their bites rarely call for treatment. These include hamsters, guinea pigs, gerbils, rabbits, squirrels, chipmunks, rats, mice, and other small rodents. Dogs, cats, and ferrets that have been properly vaccinated against rabies rarely get the disease. Vaccination is also available for horses, cattle, and sheep.

When should you suspect an animal has rabies?

You should suspect rabies in animals that show a change in behavior, are found staggering or circling, or appear paralyzed. Wild animals may become unusually tame or unusually aggressive, and they may attack other animals, people, or objects. Pets may become fearful and agitated, or act depressed and lethargic. The most common observation in rabies cases is a behavioral change.

If you suspect rabies, do not handle the animal. Seek advice from a veterinarian or your local animal control agency immediately.

Are there special problems associated with bat bites?

In recent years, the most cases of rabies in humans in the U.S. have been due to bat bites that were not recognized or reported. Bat bites are a special problem because the tiny teeth marks are difficult to see and the bite may not be noticed. If there is any chance that physical contact with a bat occurred, the bat should be captured and tested for rabies. These situations include a bat in the room of an unattended child, or waking to find a bat in the room. Call the Minnesota Department of Health at (612) 676-5414 for advice about bat contact.

How can I catch a bat for testing?

Wear heavy gloves and use a coffee can or similar hard-sided container (with a cover) to catch a bat for rabies testing. Cover the bat with the can then slide the cover underneath to trap the bat inside the container. Do not use pillow cases, towels, or blankets to capture bats; many people have been bitten through the fabric while doing this. In some Minnesota communities, an animal control officer is available to help capture a bat and get it tested for rabies. Call your veterinarian or the Minnesota Department of Health at (612) 676-5414 for information on submitting bats to the laboratory for rabies testing.

What should I do if someone is bitten?

- Wash the bite immediately with soap and running water. Thorough cleaning with generous amounts of soap and water is the most effective way to prevent wound infections after animal bites.
- Seek medical attention immediately. Your doctor will evaluate the need for rabies prevention in consultation with your local or state health department. Other infections, such as tetanus, may also result from a bite wound and may require medical attention.

- Get the pet owner's name, address, and telephone number, and the rabies vaccination status of the animal. Contact animal control or your local police/sheriff's department, and the name and contact information for the pet owner's veterinarian.
- In most cases a health dog, cat, or ferret (that is current on its rabies vaccination) that bites a person is confined and observed for 10 days. If it becomes ill during the 10 days, a veterinarian should be consulted immediately. If the person was bitten on the head or face, if the wounds are very serious, or if the animal is behaving strangely or is ill, then the animal should be euthanized immediately and checked for rabies.
- Wild animals that bite people (skunks, foxes, coyotes, raccoons, and other wild carnivores) should be sacrificed and checked for rabies. The incubation period for rabies in wild animals is unknown; because of this, an observation period is not allowed in the event of a wild animal bite. Contact your local animal control office for assistance in capturing the animal for testing.
- Domesticated wild animals or exotic pets are considered to be wild animals. Management of these bite cases will depend on the animal species and the circumstances of the bite.
- **Consult your veterinarian and you local health department or the Minnesota Department of Health for additional information and help.**

What should I do if a wild animal bites my pet?

Please notify your veterinarian or the Minnesota Board of Animal Health at 651 296 2942 if a wild animal bites your pet. If feasible, contact the local animal control office for assistance in capturing the animal for rabies testing. Dogs, Cats, and ferrets that are currently vaccinated should be revaccinated immediately, and will be quarantined at home for 40 days, by the Minnesota Board of Animal Health. An unvaccinated pet should be euthanized to avoid exposing family members should the animal develop rabies. If the animal is not euthanized, it must be vaccinated, and quarantined for 6 months by the Minnesota Board of Animal Health. The recommended vaccination schedule is a series of rabies vaccinations given on days 0, 7, and 14 of the quarantine period.

How can rabies be prevented?

- Be sure your dogs, cats, and ferrets are up-to-date on their rabies vaccinations. Vaccinated pets prevent the spread of the disease between wildlife and people.
- Teach children never to approach an unfamiliar or wild animal and encourage them to tell an adult if they are bitten.
- Never leave infants or young children alone with any animal.
- Report stray dogs and cats or animals showing unusual behavior to your local animal control office.
- Don't attract wild animals to your home or yard. Tightly cover or put away garbage cans. Bat-proof our home, garage, and outbuildings.
- Don't feed, approach, touch, or adopt wild animals. Don't keep wild animals as pets.
- Hunters and trappers should avoid animals displaying abnormal behavior, or animals found dead. Wear gloves while processing game and cook all game meat thoroughly.
- Vaccinate livestock at fairs and petting zoos that come into contact with the public. Your veterinarian may also recommend rabies vaccinations for your horses and valuable livestock. (Rabies vaccination is available for cattle, horses, and sheep.)
- When traveling, especially outside the U.S., avoid contact with dogs and cats even if they appear friendly.

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