



RABIES

What is RABIES?

Rabies is a deadly disease caused by a virus that attacks the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord). It is transmitted from infected mammals to humans and is always considered fatal. Fortunately, only a few human cases are reported each year in the United States.

Who gets rabies?

All mammals, including humans, can get rabies. Among wild animals, rabies occurs most often in raccoons, bats, skunks and foxes. Reptiles (i.e., lizards and snakes), amphibians (i.e., frogs), birds, fish and insects do not get or carry rabies.

How do people get rabies?

Rabies virus is found in the saliva and tissue or fluid from the central nervous system (CNS) of rabid animals. Rabies is most commonly transmitted to people who are bitten by and therefore exposed to the saliva of a rabid animal. Although rare, exposure can also occur if saliva or CNS tissue or fluid from a rabid animal gets into a scratch or other fresh wound or mucous membrane (eye, nose, mouth).

Can people be exposed to rabies and not know it?

While unlikely, it is possible that a person may be exposed to rabies from a bat and not realize it. Bats have small, sharp teeth and a person who is unaware or unable to tell someone else about their exposure (i.e., small child or sleeping person) may not recognize a tiny puncture wound or notice pain from a minor bite.

What are the symptoms of rabies?

Early symptoms include irritability, headache, fever and sometimes itching or pain at the site of exposure. Within days, the disease progresses to paralysis, spasms of the throat muscles, convulsions, delirium and death.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

The incubation period (time between exposure and start of symptoms) is variable but is normally several weeks to several months. Incubation periods of over one year have been reported in rare cases.

What should you do if you think you were exposed to rabies?

First, the wound should be washed with lots of soap and water as soon as possible. People should then seek medical attention to have the wound evaluated and treated if necessary. The health care provider, victim or parent/guardian should then contact the Delaware Division of Public Health (DPH), Office of Infectious Disease Epidemiology at 1-866-972-9705 or 302-744-1070 to determine whether rabies treatment is needed. An epidemiologist is available Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. to assist you.



What is the treatment for people exposed to rabies?

Specific medical attention for someone exposed to rabies is called post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP). In the United States, PEP consists of a regimen of one dose of immune globulin (IG) and four doses of rabies vaccine over a 14-day period. Rabies immune globulin and the first dose of rabies vaccine should be administered as soon as possible following exposure. Additional doses should then be administered on days 3, 7 and 14 after the first vaccination.

What happens if a rabies exposure goes untreated?

Exposure to a rabid animal does not always result in rabies. If treatment is initiated promptly following a rabies exposure, rabies can be prevented. If a rabies exposure is not treated and a person develops clinical signs of rabies, the disease is always considered to be fatal.

How can you tell if an animal has rabies?

Animals with rabies often behave strangely after the virus attacks their central nervous system. Rabid animals may attack people or other animals for no reason, or they may lose their fear of people and seem to be unusually friendly. Not all rabid animals act in these ways. To be safe, avoid all wild animals, especially raccoons, bats, foxes and skunks. Never feed or touch wild animals or stray cats and dogs.

Why is pet vaccination important?

Vaccinated pets act as a barrier between wild animals and people to keep the rabies virus from spreading.

What can be done to prevent the spread of rabies?

- Vaccinate all pets and keep them up-to-date on their vaccinations. Delaware law requires rabies vaccination for all dogs, cats and ferrets aged six months and older.
- Avoid contact with wild animals, especially raccoons, bats, foxes, and skunks.
- Do not feed or pet stray animals.
- Do not handle dead, sick or injured animals. If you must handle the animal, use heavy gloves, sticks or other tools to avoid direct contact.
- Fasten trash can lids tightly. Garbage attracts animals like raccoons, skunks, opossums, and strays looking for food.
- It is against the law to keep wild animals such as raccoons or skunks as pets. There is no rabies vaccine for most wild animals.
- Cap chimneys with screens and block openings in attics, cellars and porches to keep wild animals like bats and raccoons out of houses.
- If you have bats in your home, talk to a professional about bat-proofing your home.