

RABIES (HYDROPHOBIA) – FACT SHEET

What is rabies?

Rabies is a viral disease affecting the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord). It is transmitted by the bite of an infected mammal. It is almost always fatal once symptoms appear. Human rabies does occur in the United States, but is more common in other parts of the world.

How can you be exposed to rabies?

Humans and animals can be exposed to rabies from the saliva or brain and spinal cord tissue of a rabid animal that bites or scratches them. Wild animals, such as raccoons, bats, skunks, foxes and coyotes are more likely to carry rabies. Exposure can also occur if infected saliva or tissue gets into a fresh wound (one that has bled within 24 hours) or the eyes, nose, or mouth.

Can you be exposed to rabies and not know it?

Bats have small, sharp teeth that may not leave a visible puncture wound or noticeable pain at the bite site; therefore it is possible to be bitten without knowing it. Finding a bat indoors with a sleeping person or unattended child may be of concern.

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

After being bitten, it is important to quickly wash the animal bite or scratch with a lot of soap and water. Then contact your doctor immediately to receive rabies immune globulin and a series rabies vaccine to prevent infection. The rabies immune globulin and the first vaccine should be given as soon as possible after exposure. However, if the animal can be caught and observed or tested for rabies, it is safe to wait up to 10 days before starting the series.

What are the symptoms of rabies?

The early symptoms of rabies include:

- irritability
- headache
- fever
- itching or pain at the site of exposure.

Within days, the disease progresses to paralysis, spasms of the throat muscles, seizures, confusion and death. Most people will begin to have symptoms within 1 to 3 months after the virus infects the person. There have been rare cases in which people do not show symptoms until many years later.

What can be done to prevent the spread of rabies?

- Be a responsible pet owner by vaccinating your pets routinely
- Avoid direct contact with wild animals (raccoons, skunks, foxes, etc.)
- Teach children never to handle unfamiliar animals, wild or domestic
- Call your local animal control agency to remove any stray animals from your area

Pets that are vaccinated act as a barrier between wild animals and people to keep rabies virus from spreading. For more information on rabies, go to www.cdc.gov.

Sources:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
Harris County Public Health & Environmental Health Services