



Central Michigan District Health Department
“Promoting Healthy Families, Healthy Communities”

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Rabies

What is Rabies?

Rabies is an acute viral disease that attacks the central nervous system and kills its victims. Rabies is most often passed from animal to animal, or animal to human, through bites. It is spread to humans by the saliva of an infected animal. In recent years, 85-90% of reported animal rabies cases involved *wild* animals. In Michigan, bats and skunks are the animals most frequently testing positive for rabies.

How do humans get Rabies?

Rabies is spread through the saliva of rabies-infected wild or domestic animals. When a person is bitten, or receives a lick to an open scratch, wound or mucous membrane, the virus can enter the body. Rabies is not spread by just petting an animal. Humans don't get rabies from other humans. Human rabies is a fatal disease.

What are the symptoms of Rabies?

In humans, it can take as little as nine days or as long as a year or more for the horrible symptoms to appear. Most people who get rabies, however, develop symptoms within 60 days after being exposed. The earliest symptoms of rabies infection are pain or numbness at the site of the bite, fever, sore throat, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal pain, and sluggishness. In some people, nervousness, agitation, worry, fear or sleeplessness may indicate early nervous system involvement. Symptoms rapidly progress, usually in a matter of days, to include paralysis, spasms of the throat, hallucinations, coma, cardiac arrest, and finally, death.

How do I know if an animal is rabid?

The worst rabies culprits, in order of frequency of reported disease are: skunks, raccoons, bats, cats, foxes, cattle, dogs, horses, groundhogs, sheep, goats, and swine. Many animals infected with the rabies virus will not show visible signs of disease. The best way to identify animals that pose a risk is to recognize abnormal behavior. There are common characteristics to look for: rabid animals (wild or domestic) may stagger, appear restless, be aggressive, change the tone of their barks or growls or appear to be choking. Wild animals sometimes lose their fear of humans and act friendly. Don't think rabid animals can easily be spotted because they always drool excessively and foam at the mouth. In fact, most will display these symptoms only in the latter stages of infection, or not at all.

How do I protect myself from Rabies?

The best control measure to prevent rabies in humans is the vaccination of domestic animals, especially cats and dogs. Other prevention steps are:

- Avoid petting any unfamiliar animals.
- As a pet owner, insure your pet is vaccinated, and, if “excitable”, is confined to a pen or on a leash when children and other visitors are nearby.
- Do not pick up an injured animal.
- Report any stray animals or animal bites to your local animal control office.
- If you are walking in wooded places, wear long pants; do not buy traditionally non-domestic animals for pets, such as ferrets and raccoons, because no proven rabies vaccine is available for these types of animals.
- Be aware that safe and effective vaccinations are available for humans exposed to rabies, and finally, teach your children to stay away from unfamiliar animals and make sure they tell you immediately if they are bit or scratched by an animal.

What should I do if I’ve been bit or scratched by a potentially rabid animal?

First, wash the affected area with soap and water. Then contact your doctor, the local health department, and the county animal control office. If the owner of the animal is known, contact them immediately to verify vaccination (shot) records. If the vaccination status is unknown, the animal will need to be confined and observed if possible, or euthanized (killed) and tested. **Do not attempt to shoot the animal, especially in the head, as this is the body part needed to test for rabies.**

If the animal is unable to be captured and tested, then proceed as if the animal was a positive carrier of rabies.

How is rabies treated?

“Post-exposure” treatment is carried out after a bite or lick from a suspected rabid animal. A series of vaccine injections – in the arm, as well as an injection of anti-rabies globulin has proven 100% effective if administered within 14 days of the exposure. In addition to post-exposure treatment, effective “pre-exposure vaccinations” are available to people who may be at high risk of exposure to rabies. This group includes veterinarians, animal control workers, and zoo workers. Human pre-exposure vaccination against rabies requires only three, relatively painless, shots in the arm.

What should I do if I awake from sleeping and find a bat in my room?

Contact your local health department. If the bat can be obtained, the bat can be sent to the Michigan Department of Community Health Laboratory for testing to confirm rabies.