

# PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

# RABIES

GOVERNMENT DOCUMENTS  
COLLECTION

SEP 16 1988

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## What is rabies?

Rabies is a generally fatal disease of the central nervous system caused by a virus. Although rabies in humans is extremely rare in the United States, rabies in animals – especially wildlife – is common and increasing in certain parts of the country. Fortunately, rabies can be prevented in people and animals by following certain guidelines, including the use of vaccines for pets, avoidance of certain wild animals, and appropriate treatment for people following exposure to the rabies virus.

## How is rabies transmitted?

Rabies is transmitted by the bite or scratch of an infected (rabid) animal. The rabies virus is found in the saliva and other body fluids of a rabid animal. A person is exposed to the rabies virus when a rabid animal's body fluid, especially the saliva, touches a person's mucous membranes (the mouth, nose, or eyes) or broken skin. In very rare cases, a person can be exposed to rabies by inhaling the virus suspended in the air in caves which have a large population of rabid bats.

## What types of animals are involved in transmitting rabies?

Although the rabies virus can infect any warm-blooded mammal, only certain animals have been commonly found to be rabid. In the past, domestic animals such as dogs were often involved in the spread of rabies to humans. Since the introduction of pet vaccines, rabies has become very rare among domestic animals while increasing among wild animals. The risk of getting rabies from rodents such as squirrels, rats, mice, chipmunks, and hamsters is almost nonexistent.

## How can I tell if an animal is rabid?

A rabid animal will usually exhibit strange or unusual behavior once the rabies virus has attacked its brain cells. For example, rabid animals usually become aggressive, hyperactive and easily frightened, causing them to attack other animals and humans without provocation. However, some rabid animals may have unusual symptoms or the symptoms may not be obvious. Therefore, people should always avoid contact with any "high rabies risk" animal, especially bats, skunks, foxes, and raccoons.

## How common is animal rabies in Massachusetts?

Animal rabies is relatively uncommon in this state. In the past five years, an average of eleven animals per year have been found to be rabid by the State Rabies Laboratory. All of these animals were bats except for one fox. In Massachusetts wild animals, especially bats, present the greatest risk of rabies.

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

1. **Immediately and thoroughly** wash the wound with soap and water for at least five minutes.
2. Contact your physician and local board of health immediately. They will evaluate your need for rabies treatment. Follow their instructions.
3. If you can do so **safely**, capture or locate the animal. The local board of health will provide further instructions for submitting the animal to the State Rabies Laboratory if necessary.
4. If your pet has been exposed to a potentially rabid animal, you should also follow these guidelines except that your veterinarian and local board of health should be contacted instead of your physician.

## **What is the treatment for people exposed to rabies?**

A person who has never received rabies shots is given one injection of protective antibodies and five injections of rabies vaccine in the arm. These injections, given over a one-month period, have replaced the old treatment given in the stomach muscles. The current treatment is highly effective in preventing rabies after exposure to a rabid animal. To be most effective, the treatment must be given as soon as possible. If an animal is available for rabies testing, however, the treatment may be delayed until the results of the tests are known.

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

1. Avoid direct contact with wildlife, especially bats, skunks, foxes, and raccoons, which may transmit rabies. **Any** animal, wild or domestic, which exhibits abnormal behavior should be avoided. Promptly report such animals to your local animal control officer.
2. Make sure that your pets are properly vaccinated against rabies. By law, all dogs must be vaccinated against rabies. It is important that cats also be vaccinated. Due to their "hunter" nature, cats often come into contact with bats and other "high rabies risk" animals. Check with your veterinarian to be sure your pet's vaccination is up to date.
3. Discourage your children and pets from interacting with wildlife or unfamiliar animals. Do not allow your children to roam unsupervised where there is wildlife. Obey animal control laws such as leash laws.
4. Do not keep wild animals such as skunks, ferrets, and raccoons as pets. There is no approved rabies vaccine for any wildlife species.
5. If you have bats living inside your house, they should be removed. Consult a professional exterminator who is familiar with bat removal and "bat-proofing."
6. Do not handle dead, sick, or injured wild animals; instead, contact the police or the animal control officer. If you must touch such an animal, use gloves or instruments.
7. If you are bitten or scratched by an unfamiliar animal, do not try to determine yourself whether the animal is rabid. Seek advice from your physician or local board of health.
8. Animal control officers, spelunkers (cave explorers), and others who have a lot of contact with stray or wild animals should consider getting a routine (pre-exposure) rabies vaccine.

## **Where can I call for further information?**

### **The Massachusetts Department of Public Health**

Division of Communicable Disease Control (617) 727-2686  
Office of Public Information and Health Education (617) 727-0049

### **Your Local Board of Health**

In the telephone book under listings for your municipal government.

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