

What is rabies?

Rabies is a disease of the brain caused by a virus. It results from exposure to an animal with rabies. Rabies in humans is always fatal.

Who gets rabies?

Anyone can get rabies after exposure to a rabid animal. Rabies is spread when the virus from the animal's saliva (mouth) gets through a person's skin via open cuts or wounds or in the mouth or eyes. The chance that rabies infection will result varies with the type of the contact or "exposure."

What is exposure to rabies?

There are two types of exposure. One type is a bite (any penetration of the skin by teeth). The second is a non-bite exposure in which saliva or brain and spinal cord (neural) tissue from an animal with rabies gets into any, wound, open skin, eyes, nose, or mouth.

Bats pose a different problem. The bite of a bat can be so small that it may not be seen. People found in rooms with bats, who are unable to state, "I know I was not bitten," should be considered potentially exposed. For example persons that awaken to find a bat in the room or children alone with a bat in a room should be considered exposed to rabies.

What animals get rabies?

Some animals are more likely to be infected with rabies than others. For example, meat-eating wild animals (especially skunks, raccoons, foxes, coyotes, bobcats and bats) most often get rabies. All domestic animals (such as dogs, cats, horses, and cattle) can be infected. Rodents (such as squirrels, hamsters, and mice) and lagomorphs (including rabbits and hares) rarely get rabies.

How can you tell if an animal is rabid?

Although some animals with rabies look and act normal, most will develop one of two distinct forms of the disease. One form is called "furious rabies." The infected animal is easily over-excited or angered. The other is "dumb rabies." In this type of rabies, the infected animal becomes calm and paralyzed (has difficulty moving). Usually, animals become irritable, restless, and nervous. An infected animal may have a tendency to eat unusual things like sticks, straw, stones, and soil. Difficulty swallowing causes the animal to drool saliva, but a drooling dog is not always a rabid dog. The only way to tell for sure whether an animal has rabies is to kill it in a humane manner and test its brain for the rabies virus.

How long can animals spread rabies?

Dogs and cats can spread rabies for several days before they become ill, and during illness. The amount of time varies for other animals.

What should you do if you are exposed to a rabid animal?

Immediately wash all bite wounds and scratches thoroughly with soap and water. Contact a doctor as soon as possible. Treatment for exposed individuals includes both human rabies immune globulin (HRIG) and rabies vaccine. Individuals previously immunized or treated for rabies exposure should receive only booster immunizations of rabies vaccine.

How can rabies be prevented?

- Vaccination of pets against rabies is the best way to reduce human exposure.
- Avoid contact with all wild animals.
- Do not keep wild animals as pets.
- Control of stray animals can decrease both animal and human exposure to rabies.
- Animals that have had contact with an animal that might have rabies should be reported to a veterinarian.