

Somerset County Health Department Environmental Health

Rabies Facts:

Rabies is caused by a virus that attacks the nervous system.

Rabies is a disease of warm-blooded animals. In the United States, rabies is most often seen in raccoons, skunks, foxes, and bats. Other mammals including dogs, cats, ferrets, and farm animals can get rabies if they are not vaccinated. Rabbits and small rodents including squirrels, hamsters, guinea pigs, gerbils, chipmunks, rats, and mice are almost never found to be infected with rabies. Woodchucks, also known as groundhogs, account for most cases of rabies in rodents.

Rabies is usually spread to humans through the bite of a rabid animal. Other potential exposures include getting saliva or other infectious material (such as brain tissue) from a rabid animal into an open wound or in the eyes, nose, or mouth. Petting a rabid animal or contact with the blood, urine, or feces of a rabid animal will not spread rabies. Many recent human rabies cases in the United States have been associated with rabid bats. Although people usually know when they have been bitten by a bat, bats have small teeth that may not leave marks on the skin. Therefore, treatment for rabies should also be considered when a bat is present and one cannot reasonably rule out an exposure (e.g., a sleeping person awakens to find a bat in the room or an adult witnesses a bat in the room with a previously unattended child or mentally disabled or intoxicated person).

Rabies virus infects the brain and spinal cord of animals and humans. Rabies in animals causes changes in behavior and paralysis. Animals may become very aggressive or unusually friendly. Paralysis of the muscles of the throat and jaw may cause drooling. Seizures are common. In humans, the virus causes fever, headaches, abnormal sensation, confusion, spasms of the throat muscles, hydrophobia (fear of water), and seizures. The disease rapidly progresses to paralysis, coma, and death. Rabies is almost always fatal.

Rabies can be prevented by getting rabies shots

- Rabies shots given soon after an exposure will prevent rabies
- If you have frequent contact with potentially rabid animals or if you will be spending time in a foreign country where rabies is common, consider getting pre-exposure rabies vaccinations.

If you are bitten by or otherwise exposed to a potentially rabid animal, you should:

- If it is a wild animal, try to trap or kill it without damaging its head and without risking further exposure
- If it is an owned animal, get the animal owner's name, address, and telephone number
- Immediately wash the wound well with soap and water
- Get prompt medical attention

- Report the incident to your local animal control agency, health department, or police

Exposure to rabies can be prevented

- Do not approach, handle, or feed wild or stray animals
- Vaccinate your dogs, cats, and ferrets against rabies and keep the vaccinations up-to-date
- Do not leave pets outside unattended or allow them to roam free
- Feed pets indoors and tightly cover outdoor garbage cans
- Teach children never to approach wild animals or animals that they do not know
- Prevent bats from entering your home by using window screens and chimney caps and by closing any openings in your attic, basement, porch, or garage
- Wear gloves when handling your pet if it has been in a fight with another animal; isolate it from people and other animals and call your veterinarian or local health department