



Fact Sheet

Rabies in Animals



What is rabies?

Rabies is a deadly disease caused by a virus that attacks the brain and spinal cord. Infected mammals can spread rabies virus to humans and other mammals. Rabies is almost always fatal once symptoms appear.

What animals can get rabies?

In North America the main sources of rabies are foxes, coyotes, wolves, skunks, raccoons and bats. Rabies is most often seen among wild animals, but any mammal can become infected with rabies. In Ontario, less than 10% of reported rabid animals are cats or dogs, but they are responsible for about 50-60% of all human post-exposure vaccinations

Pets and livestock can get rabies infection if they are not vaccinated regularly against this disease.

What does rabies look like in an animal?

The first sign of rabies is usually a change in an animal's behaviour.

There are two types of rabies (Furious or Dumb rabies). Some animals may show a combination of these two types described below or they may show no signs of rabies at all.

Furious Rabies – the animal may:

- Wander aimlessly – usually in a straight line
- Show excitement, be restless, or irritable
- Attack and bite objects
- Eat cloth, soil, stones or sticks
- Gnaw and bite their own limbs/wounds
- Have a change in bark
- Have lower jaw sag/hang, muscle paralysis, heavy drooling and seizures
- Have difficulty controlling body movements, muscle weakness and death

Dumb (or Paralytic) Rabies:

- The animal rarely bites, is not irritable
- Change of tone in bark – hoarse bellow
- Animal may look like it is choking
- Paralysis of facial muscles
- Yawning movements, salivation
- Progressive weakness and death

How do people become exposed to rabies?

People usually get exposed to the rabies virus when an infected animal bites them. Although rare, exposure may also occur when an animal with rabies scratches someone or when saliva from a rabid animal enters an open cut or the eyes, nose or mouth of a human.

If you handle high risk species often (i.e. foxes, coyotes, skunks or raccoons), consider getting the human rabies vaccine to prevent infection. Talk to your health care provider.

Is there a rabies vaccine for pets?

Yes, pets should be vaccinated no sooner than 3 months of age and need a booster shot every one to three years depending on the vaccine.

How does the vaccination process work?

A veterinarian should be scheduled to come into the community every year to vaccinate all eligible pets. At the same time, the vet may also spay or neuter pets to control the number of animals in your community.



What should be done if you see an animal bite/scratch a person?

Watch the animal from a safe distance, taking note of what it looks like. Contact the local animal control authority in your community for follow up with the animal. If the animal is a bat and needs to be captured, be aware that the majority of bat exposures occur while trying to catch them. Anyone trying to capture or remove a bat must wear protective clothing and gloves to avoid being scratched or bitten.

Why shouldn't dogs be culled?

Culling means killing off some animals as a method of controlling the animal population or to prevent the spread of disease.

Culling dogs is not an effective way to control rabies. It can be difficult for a community to accept culling and it does not decrease the dog population over a longer period of time. Within a short period of time, the dog population increases again.

If culling is done in a community where rabies is a risk, it can be dangerous to kill dogs that may have the rabies virus. If the dog is not disposed of properly, other animals may forage on the carcass and the rabies virus can spread to other animals in the area, which actually increases the risk of rabies in the animal population.

What can be done to control the dog population if culling isn't done?

Vaccination campaigns are often combined with spaying and neutering. These are effective ways to reduce the number of dogs in a community over a long period of time.

Animal Species	Condition of animal at time of exposure	Management of animal
Domestic animal (i.e. dog, cat, or ferret)	Vaccinated, appears healthy and is available for a 10 day observation	<p>Refer to "Fact Sheet for Owners of Animals Involved in a Rabies Investigation" for answers to common questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Isolate, confine and observe the animal for a 10 day period. The animal must be tied up or caged away from other animals and humans. Avoid all contact when feeding the animal.➤ Report to Environmental Health Officer (EHO):<ul style="list-style-type: none">· Any change in animal behaviour· Sudden death of animal· If animal escapes
	Unvaccinated, appears healthy and is available for a 10 day observation period.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Work with the owner/community for isolation of 10 days➤ Isolate, confine and observe the animal for a 10 day period. The animal must be tied up or caged away from other animals and humans. Avoid all contact when feeding the animal.➤ Report to EHO<ul style="list-style-type: none">· Any change in animal behaviour· Sudden death of animal· If animal escapes➤ Animal should be vaccinated for rabies within 14 days of the end of the observation period. Animals under 3 months of age at the time of exposure should be vaccinated for rabies by the time they are 3.5 months of age.➤ Euthanize animal only if owner refuses to isolate the animal.

Animal Species	Condition of animal at time of exposure	Management of animal
Wild animal (i.e. skunk, bats, coyote, fox, raccoon and most carnivores), stray, or unknown	Animal is wild, involved in biting or attacking humans, shows no fear of humans, or is a stray	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Regard as rabid and avoid any contact with suspected animal➤ Anybody who had contact with the animal should be assessed immediately for post exposure prophylaxis.➤ If possible the animal should be humanely killed. Every effort must be taken not to destroy the head so that it can be submitted for testing. Target area should be heart and lungs directly behind the front legs.➤ Before euthanizing the animal and sample collection, contact the EHO to verify the sample can be submitted for testing. For your own health and safety and to ensure the sample can be tested by the lab, refer to the "Personal Protective Equipment Instructions" and "How to Collect a Sample for Rabies Virus Testing" factsheets. Do not remove the head of a small animal such as a rat, bat, mouse, etc. These small animals can be submitted for testing in the sample container.