



pennsylvania veterinary medical association

advancing animal welfare and human health while ensuring the vitality of the profession

pvma fact sheet

Facts About Rabies

What is rabies?

Rabies is a viral disease that affects the nervous system. It is contracted by being bitten by or coming in contact with the saliva or nervous tissue of a rabid animal. Unless immediate medical care is administered, the disease travels from the contact site through the nerves to the brain, causing brain disease and eventually death. It may take several weeks or even a few years for people to show symptoms after getting infected with rabies, but usually people start to show signs of the disease 1 to 3 months after the virus infects them. The early signs of rabies can be fever or headache, but this changes quickly to nervous system signs, such as confusion, sleepiness, or agitation. This is why it is very important to talk to your doctor or health care provider right away if any animal bites you, especially a wild animal.

Can animals transmit rabies to me?

Yes, many kinds of animal can pass rabies to people. Wild animals are much more likely to carry rabies, especially raccoons, skunks, bats, foxes, and coyotes. However, dogs, cats, cattle (cows), or any warm-blooded animal can pass rabies to people. Many companion animals are vaccinated against rabies, but never assume any animal unfamiliar to you has been vaccinated. In 2010 in Pennsylvania, cats tied skunks for the second highest number of confirmed rabies cases, so handling or feeding strays is not a good idea. You also should always wash any bite thoroughly and check with your health care provider about what to do if any animal bites you.

How can I protect myself from getting rabies?

- Keep vaccinations up to date for all dogs, cats, and ferrets. This requirement is important not only to keep your pets from getting rabies, but also to provide a barrier of protection for you, if your animal is bitten by a rabid wild animal.
- Never let your pets roam freely out of doors. If your pet is bitten by a wild animal, seek veterinary assistance for the animal immediately.
- If you see wild animals behaving strangely, call local authorities. Also alert them to any stray companion animals in your neighborhood.
- Never handle, feed or take in any animals unfamiliar to you. Many of the obvious signs of rabies like foaming at the mouth or excessive drooling may never occur, so you have no way of knowing if an animal is rabid.
- Spay or neuter your pets to help reduce the number of unwanted pets that may not be properly cared for or regularly vaccinated.



Avoid direct contact with unfamiliar animals:

- Enjoy wild animals (raccoons, skunks, foxes) from afar. Do not handle, feed, or unintentionally attract wild animals with open garbage cans or litter.
- Never adopt wild animals or bring them into your home. Do not try to nurse sick animals to health. Call animal control or an animal rescue agency for assistance.
- Teach children never to handle unfamiliar animals, wild or domestic, even if they appear friendly. "Love your own, leave other animals alone" is a good principle for children to learn.
- Prevent bats from entering living quarters or occupied spaces in homes, churches, schools, and other similar areas, where they might come in contact with people and pets.
- When traveling abroad, avoid direct contact with wild animals and be especially careful around dogs in developing countries. Rabies is common in developing countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America where dogs are the major reservoir of rabies. Tens of thousands of people die of rabies each year in these countries. Before traveling abroad, consult with a health care provider, travel clinic, or your health department about the risk of exposure to rabies, preexposure prophylaxis, and how you should handle an exposure, should it arise.

More information about rabies?

Learn more about rabies at CDC's rabies website at www.cdc.gov/rabies or the CDC rabies kids page at www.cdc.gov/rabiesandkids which includes questions and answers, prevention and control information, and more. The World Rabies Day website at www.worldrabiesday.org also has extensive resources in its Education Bank.