



Rabies

What is rabies?

Rabies is a zoonotic disease (diseases spread from animals to people) caused by a virus. *Rabies* is found worldwide, and there are many animal hosts. Certain wildlife species can carry specific strains (for example, bats, raccoons, skunks, and foxes). Rabies affects the central nervous system. Rabid animals have abnormal behaviour, can appear unusually tame or aggressive, and have difficulty walking. Rabies is fatal; vaccines are available to treat rabies before symptoms appear. Rabies in people is very rare in Canada.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms usually appear one to three months after infection, but this varies. Early symptoms include headache, fever, lethargy and sometimes discomfort at the site of bite or exposure. Within days, the disease progresses to paralysis, convulsions, delirium, and death.

How is it spread?

Rabies is most often spread by bites from infected animals. The saliva from a rabid animal contains the virus. Occasionally, nonbite transmission of rabies can occur if saliva or nerve tissue (brain and spinal cord) from an infected animal contacts broken skin (open wounds) or mucous membranes (skin found in the eyes, nose and mouth).

How is it diagnosed?

Rabies is diagnosed by symptoms, history of exposure and laboratory testing.

Who is at risk of infection?

People bitten by infected animals; including bats, raccoons, skunks, and foxes are at risk. In areas of the world with canine rabies, people bitten by rabid dogs have a high risk of contracting the disease.

How can rabies be prevented?

Be a responsible pet owner. Vaccinate your pet against rabies.

Enjoy wildlife from a distance. Do not feed or handle wild animals.

Prevent dog and cat bites. Do not pet unfamiliar dogs or cats.

A-Z DISEASE FACT SHEETS

Go to the hospital if you are bitten. Wash wounds with soap and water for at least 10 minutes following a bite or other potential exposure to rabies. Seek medical attention immediately.

How is it treated?

Rabies is fatal once clinical signs appear. Prompt treatment is extremely effective in preventing the disease after exposure to a rabid animal. Rabies treatment includes wound care, administration of rabies immune globulin and a series of rabies vaccines.

What is the public health response?

Health care providers and laboratories must notify cases of rabies to Public Health. Public Health staff may interview the health care provider and patient (or caregivers) to find out how the infection occurred, identify other people at risk of infection, implement control measures and provide other advice.

Further Information

For additional information, contact your health-care provider, **local Public Health office** or **Tele-Care 811**.

USEFUL WEBSITES

Public Health Agency of Canada <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/>

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