

Rabies Fact Sheet

Rabies is a deadly disease caused by a virus that attacks the nervous system

Rabies is a disease of warm-blooded animals

In Maryland, rabies is most often found in raccoons, skunks, foxes, cats, bats, and groundhogs. Other mammals including dogs, ferrets, and farm animals can get rabies if they are not vaccinated. Rabies is rarely reported in rabbits and small rodents, such as squirrels, hamsters, guinea pigs, gerbils, chipmunks, rats, and mice. Many recent human rabies cases in the United States have been associated with bats. Although people usually know when a bat has bitten them, bats have small teeth that may not leave marks on the skin.

Rabies is usually spread to humans through the bite of an infected (“rabid”) animal

Other possible exposures include getting infected saliva from a rabid animal into an open wound or in the eyes, nose, or mouth. Rabies is not spread by petting a rabid animal or contact with blood, urine, or feces (stool).

Rabies virus infects the brain and spinal cord of animals and humans

Rabies in animals causes paralysis and changes in behavior. Animals may become very aggressive or unusually friendly. Muscles of the throat and jaw may become paralyzed and cause drooling. Seizures are common. In humans, the virus causes fever, headaches, unusual tingling sensation, confusion, tightening 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 in humans can be prevented by getting rabies shots

- Rabies shots given soon after an exposure will prevent rabies.
- Pre-exposure rabies vaccinations should be considered if you
 - 1) Have frequent contact with potentially rabid animals; or
 - 2) Will be traveling in a foreign country and you are likely to come in contact with animals in an area where dog rabies is common and prompt access to appropriate medical care may be limited.

If you are bitten by or exposed to an animal that may be rabid, you should:

- If it is a wild animal, try to trap it if you can do so safely. If the animal must be killed, try not to damage the head.
- 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; if available, use a disinfectant to flush the wound.
- Get prompt medical attention.
- Immediately report the exposure to your local animal control agency, health department, or police.
- Consider treatment if a bat was present and exposure cannot be reasonably ruled out (e.g., a sleeping person awakens to find a bat in the room, or an adult sees a bat in the room with a previously unattended child or mentally disabled or intoxicated person).

Exposure to rabies can be prevented

- Do not approach, handle, or feed wild or stray animals.
- Have your dogs, cats, and ferrets vaccinated against rabies and keep the vaccinations up-to-date.
- Do not leave pets outside unattended or allow them to roam free.
- Cover garbage cans tightly and do not leave pet food outside; this may attract wild and stray animals.
- Teach children to stay away from 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 greater than ¼ inch by ½ inch. Bats found in the home should be safely collected, if possible, and tested for rabies.
- Wear gloves when handling an animal if it has been in a fight with another animal. Keep it away from people and other animals and call your veterinarian or local health department to report the animal exposure.