

Rabies Fact Sheet

What is rabies?

Rabies is a viral disease that affects the nervous system of mammals. In the last stages of the disease, the virus moves from the brain into the salivary glands and saliva. From there the virus can be transmitted through a bite or by contact with mucous membranes (nose, mouth, and eyes). Rabies is almost always fatal once symptoms occur.

How is rabies transmitted?

Rabies is transmitted by a bite of an infected animal.

There are a few documented cases of rabies being contracted in caves where bats reside and in laboratories that work with the virus. It has occasionally been passed with a corneal transplant from a person unknowingly infected rabies.

Who can get rabies?

Any mammal can get rabies, including humans. Rabies is seen in domestic animals such as; dogs, cats, cows, and horses. In North America, wildlife accounts for 99% of the rabies. Wildlife most commonly diagnosed with rabies includes; raccoons, bats, skunks, foxes, and coyotes. However, in Mexico and other Latin American countries, dogs are the common carrier of rabies.

What wildlife in Los Angeles County has rabies?

Rabies is detected yearly in bats. About one out of every 12 bats tested by the health department has rabies. Rabies can occur in other wildlife but has not been detected in other wildlife in the County for over twenty years.

What are the symptoms of rabies in people?

Early symptoms include irritability, headache, fever and sometimes itching or pain at the site of exposure. Early symptoms are rarely diagnostic. The disease eventually progresses to paralysis, spasms of the throat muscles, convulsions, delirium and death.

What are the symptoms of rabies in animals?

Changes in behavior are common in rabid animals: nocturnal animals are seen during the day, animals are not afraid from humans, become aggressive, attack other animals or people without provocation, may have paralysis of the limbs or throat, or just lay down.

How soon after infection do symptoms appear?

The incubation period is variable but is normally 3 to 8 weeks. Incubation periods up to several years have been reported. Patients having severe bites or bites about the head usually have the shortest incubation periods.

Can people spread rabies?

Person to person transmission is extremely rare, however, precautions should be taken to prevent exposure to the saliva of the diseased person.

How can I protect my animals and myself?

The best protection against rabies is vaccination of pets and avoidance of risk. Vaccination of dogs is required by law. Cats are required to be vaccinated in the unincorporated areas of the County. Keep your pets indoors and make sure their vaccinations are current.

What should I do if my pet gets bitten by a rabid animal?

If the attacking animal is captured, the brain will be tested for rabies. If your pet is not vaccinated, and the attacking animal was rabid, your pet may be disposed of as required by law.

What should I do if I am exposed to rabies?

If you are bitten or scratched by a suspect rabid animal, or saliva from the animal enters an open wound, or becomes in contact with your nose, mouth, or eyes, wash the wound or contact area with soap and water. Call your physician or the health department and get medical attention immediately. Remember, rabies is a fatal disease. Post-exposure prophylaxis should be started soon after the exposure. The treatment, when needed, consists of 5 vaccine doses in the arm, and one dose of rabies immune globulin.

What is the preventive treatment for a potential rabies exposure (e.g., animal bite or scratch)?

Preventive treatment requires prompt scrubbing of the bite site with soap and copious amounts of water, followed by the administration of rabies immune globulin (dosage depending on weight) and five doses of human diploid cell rabies vaccine administered into the arm muscle on days 0, 3, 7, 14 and 28 after exposure.