

RABIES: What is it?



What is Rabies?

Rabies is a viral illness spread through infected saliva. It is usually spread through a bite. In developing countries, dogs are the cause of 90% of rabies in people. In North America and Europe, rabies is most commonly found in wild animals such as, skunks, raccoons, muskrats, foxes and bats. Most often these wild animals are what spread the disease to our pets and livestock. Rabies is rarely found in small rodents such as chipmunks, squirrels, rabbits, gerbils or hamsters.

What are the Signs or Symptoms of Rabies?

The time from when someone gets bitten and when the symptoms of rabies occur varies widely. It typically takes between 30 and 90 days; however, it can range from 5 days to more than 2 years.

Symptoms may start with:

- Fevers, chills, and general feeling of illness
- Vague respiratory, gastrointestinal, and neurological symptoms
- Paresthesia (tingling) at the bite site

People with rabies then develop one of two forms of rabies symptoms. About 80% of people experience the furious form.

Furious Form

- Hallucinations, agitation
- Thrashing, biting, running
- Hydrophobia (fear of water) / Aerophobia (fear of drafts of air)
- Changing mental status

Paralytic Form

- Weakness
- Paralysis

In both forms you will also experience:

- Fever
- Seizures
- Coma
- Death

What is the Treatment for Rabies?

After getting bitten, immediately wash the wound with soap and water for at least 10 minutes. If your healthcare provider feels you had been exposed to rabies, you will be treated with a series of shots. These shots will provide you protection from the disease if given immediately after being exposed to rabies. Unfortunately, there is no known effective treatment for rabies once symptoms appear.

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What Defines an “Exposure?”

Exposure or contact needs:

1. The presence of the rabies virus
 - a. Typically in saliva, however it can be in nerve tissue (e.g. brain) or cerebral spinal fluid
 - b. Contact with blood, urine, or feces DOES NOT count as an exposure
 - c. Rabies virus does not cause illness if it is found in dried material
2. The rabies virus must come into contact with an open wound, scratch, abrasion, or a mucous membrane (e.g. eyes, mouth, nose)

Most exposures occur through a bite; however, you can get the disease by coming into contact with infected saliva through a scratch or at the site of a mucous membrane.

Be extra cautious with possible bat contact. The bite from a bat is so small; people may not realize that they have been bitten. If you've been very close to a bat and do not know if you have been bitten or scratched, contact your healthcare provider.

Wound inflicted by canine teeth of *Big brown bat* while bat was being handled;
picture taken same day as bite



Sources: WI Division of Public Health and the University of Maryland Medical Center (1/09).