

Rabies

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

Rabies is an infection of the brain caused by the rabies virus. The rabies virus is passed on by the bite or scratch of a rabid animal. Rabies is a fatal disease in mammals.

Rabies is almost always fatal to humans if not treated.

All mammals can be infected with rabies. In Saskatchewan, the most common animals that can spread rabies are bats and skunks. Dogs, cats, horses, cows, and other mammals can spread rabies.

How You Can Get Rabies

The rabies virus is carried in the saliva or drool of an infected animal. Rabies is spread when a rabid animal bites, cuts or scrapes a person. Rabies is spread when the saliva of a rabid animal enters a fresh scratch or cut in the skin or enters the eyes, nose or mouth.

A rabid animal can spread rabies up to 10 days before showing any symptoms.

People exposed to a bat can get rabies even if they do not notice a bite or scratch. Bat bites are very small and not easily seen. Exposure to a bat is considered to be a very high risk of rabies.

Signs and Symptoms of Rabies in Animals

- loss of appetite or refusing to eat
- unusual aggression or depression
- difficulty swallowing, drooling
- weakness in legs or paralysis

Skunks and other wild animals might lose their fear of humans.

What To Do if an Animal Bites You

First, wash the bite wound with plenty of soap and warm running water. Then go to a health care provider as soon as possible. A tetanus booster vaccine may be needed.

If possible, contain the animal.

The **name, address, and telephone number of the animal owner** is needed so that a follow up investigation can be carried out. The follow up investigation is done to ensure that the biting animal was not rabid at the time of the biting incident. Public Health Inspectors do not take the animal away.

The health care provider reports the incident to Public Health Inspectors for follow up.

If there is a high risk of rabies from the bite, the rabies vaccine is given. The rabies vaccine is very effective in preventing rabies.

What Happens When a Pet Bites

When a pet bites someone, Public Health Inspectors ask the animal owner to keep the pet confined on their property and watch for signs of rabies for the 10 day period after the bite. This is to make sure the animal is healthy (e.g. not infected with rabies when the bite occurred). No further action or treatment is needed if the animal is healthy at the end of the 10 day observation period.

If the animal was infected with rabies, the signs of rabies are usually noticed within 5 days after the bite.

If the animal becomes ill or dies within the 10 day observation period the animal may be sent away for rabies testing.

When Will I Know if I Have Rabies

Rabies symptoms are usually noticed from 3 weeks to several months after the bite of a rabid animal. This depends on the wound site, distance to the brain, bite severity, and strain of rabies virus.

After someone is bitten by a rabid animal, the rabies virus slowly travels through the body along nerves and the spine until it reaches the brain. The rabies virus does not spread through blood.

The rabies vaccine is given if there is a high risk of rabies from the bite. The rabies vaccine is very effective in preventing rabies when it is given as soon as possible after the bite. Once symptoms develop, there is no treatment. Most cases are fatal.

How to Catch a Bat

Bats have a high risk for carrying rabies. If you think you were exposed to a bat contact a Public Health Inspector to find out if the bat needs to be tested for rabies.

If a bat is in your home and you are not sure if someone was exposed to it (e.g. a bat found in a bedroom while someone is sleeping or a small child was left alone) you can contact a Pest Control Company or have a responsible person safely catch the bat for rabies testing.

What is needed to safely catch a bat:

- leather work gloves
- a small box or container, such as a coffee can
- piece of cardboard
- tape

Put the gloves on. When the bat lands, approach it slowly. Gently place the box or container over the bat. Slide the cardboard under the container to trap the bat inside. Tape the cardboard to the container securely and punch small holes in the cardboard, allowing the bat to breathe. Call a Public Health Inspector to make arrangements for rabies testing.

If you see a bat in your home and you are confident no human or pet was exposed, close all doors and windows leading to the room except those leading to the outside. The bat usually leaves on its own. If the bat does not leave, it can be caught as described above and released outdoors.

Rabies Can Be Prevented

Be a responsible pet owner. Keep vaccinations current for all pets including dogs, cats and ferrets. See your veterinarian if your pet's behaviour changes suddenly.

Test dead, sick, or easily captured bats for rabies if people or pets have been exposed.

Prevent bats from entering houses, apartments, schools and other places where they might contact people and pets. Repair torn window screens. Fix holes in walls.

Pre-exposure rabies vaccinations are recommended for veterinarians, animal control workers, wildlife and animal conservation officers, cave explorers and anyone who is or could be at high risk of rabies exposure. If you are at high risk of contacting rabid animals call Public Health to discuss pre-exposure rabies vaccinations.

How to Prevent Animal Bites

- Never leave children alone with animals, even if it is the family pet.
- Never play with or pet stray animals, even if they look friendly.
- Before petting an animal always ask for the owner's permission.
- Never approach an animal tied up in a yard.
- Never put your hands or fingers through a fence that is around a yard with a dog.
- Never try to play with a dog if it is sleeping, eating or looking after it's puppies.

For information call a Public Health Inspector at:

Regina	(306) 766-7755
Fort Qu'Appelle	(306) 695-4015
Indian Head	(306) 695-4016

Visit the Regina Qu'Appelle Health Region website at: www.rqhealth.ca

For 24-hour professional health advice and information, call:

