

Rabies

What is rabies?

Rabies is an infectious disease caused by a virus that infects nerves in warm-blooded animals. The rabies virus reaches the brain through the nervous system.

Eventually it reaches the salivary glands, and can be released into the saliva of the mouth. By this time, the disease has usually affected the brain and caused a change in the behaviour of the animal. It eventually causes death.

Although the animal may be infectious it could be a few days before any clinical signs or symptoms show, but they are still able to transmit the disease.

Are there different types of rabies?

There are different strains of rabies, but unlike flu strains, one vaccine protects against all strains. There are three strains presently in Ontario: 'arctic fox' (predominantly in foxes and skunks), 'mid-Atlantic' raccoon (mainly found in raccoons), and a variety of bat strains.

How is rabies spread?

Rabies moves from an infected animal through the saliva by:

- biting
- contact with the virus through an open cut, sore or wound
- contact with the virus through mucous membranes (mouth, nose, eyes)

What should I do if I'm bitten by an animal?

Immediately wash the wound well with soap and water. All bites and scratches from a suspect animal must be reported. Either you, your doctor or the hospital emergency department must report the incident to the local health unit.

What are the symptoms of rabies?

In humans early symptoms may include numbness around the bite, fever, headache, and general malaise. Later symptoms may include muscle spasms and hydrophobia (fear of water).

In an adult, clinical symptoms can appear as soon as two weeks after exposure, or up to one year following exposure. Once symptoms appear, death is imminent. In animals: depression, partial paralysis, sometimes aggressive behaviour, followed by death.

Are there human cases of rabies?

The most recent human case of rabies occurred when an Alberta man who was bitten by a bat in August 2006 did not receive treatment and then died from rabies at the end of April 2007. Before that in 2006, a 16 year old boy from Texas died from bat associated rabies. Bats can bite and a person not even be aware of it or able to see teeth marks.

How can I reduce my risk of rabies exposure?

- ▶ Make sure your dogs and cats rabies vaccinations are up-to-date (check with your veterinarian).
- ▶ Don't allow your pets to wander, particularly at night.
- ▶ Keep your distance from unfamiliar animals, particularly ones that appear sick.
- ▶ Don't feed wildlife.
- ▶ Attempt to exclude bats from inside your home.

Does my pet's rabies vaccination work for all strains of rabies?

Yes, if your pet's vaccination is current, your pet is protected from fox, raccoon and bat strain rabies.

Where can I get more information?

For more information call Your Health Connection at 721-7520 (1-877-721-7520) Monday to Friday or visit the following websites:

Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit
www.simcoemuskokahealth.org

Ministry of Natural Resources
www.mnr.gov.on.ca

Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care
www.health.gov.on.ca