

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 two strains presently in Ontario: 'arctic fox' (predominantly in foxes and skunks), 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 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, the average incubation period is three to eight weeks. However, clinical symptoms can appear as soon as two weeks after exposure, or up to one year following exposure. Once symptoms appear, death is imminent

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. Rabies vaccinations in Ontario are mandatory for all domestic cats, dogs and ferrets. If your dog or cat didn't get vaccinated during a routine veterinary visit, you can take advantage of the low-cost rabies clinics in your area in the fall. Check with your local veterinarian or on the health unit's website www.simcoemuskokahealth.org for a posted schedule.

How can I protect myself, my family and my pets?

The best prevention is to reduce your risk and your animal's risk of coming in contact with an infected animal.

For your Pet

- Don't let your pets run free. Keep them indoors at night.
- Keep all your animal's vaccinations current. Owners are required by law to vaccinate cats, dogs and any animals that are exposed to the public such as sheep, cows and horses at petting zoos and riding stables.

Remind children that you can't always tell if an animal is friendly or has rabies so they should:

- always ask permission before petting any dog or cat
- tell an adult right away if they ever see a lost, unknown or injured animal
- never touch or play with ANY wild animal, even squirrels, chipmunks, raccoons, rabbits and bats
- tell an adult right away, if they have ever touched, or have been scratched or bitten by **ANY** animal.

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

All bites and scratches from a suspect animal must be reported. If you are bitten or scratched by any animal, wash the wound well with soap and water and contact your family physician immediately.

Either you, your doctor or the hospital emergency department, must report the incident to the local health unit. If you are reporting the incident to the health unit, include as much information as you can about the animal and if possible, the owner's name, address and phone number. Public health inspectors will use this information to contact the owner, check rabies certificates and decide what other actions are needed.

Where can I get more information?

For more information call Your Health Connection at 705-721-7520 (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

Canadian Food Inspection Agency
www.inspection.gc.ca

For more information on children and dog bite prevention visit www.kidshealth.org