

Rabies: Frequently Asked Questions

What species carry rabies in Minnesota?

- All mammals are susceptible to rabies infection; however, the most common wildlife reservoirs for rabies in Minnesota are skunks and bats.
- Squirrels, rabbits, mice, rats, and other small rodents rarely die of or transmit rabies.
- There are several strains of rabies that affect different species. In Minnesota, the skunk strain and several different strains affecting bats are most common. The raccoon strain of rabies is not present in Minnesota. Raccoons can become infected with the skunk strain of rabies, however it is rare.

How do I know if an animal is carrying rabies?

- The clinical signs of rabies vary depending on the species of animal affected and the strain of rabies.
- Most animals show behavioral changes or neurological signs. Cats often are aggressive. Cattle may bellow frequently and have trouble walking and swallowing. Dogs show a variety of signs ranging from aggression to difficulty swallowing and paralysis. Some animals die rapidly without marked clinic signs.
- Signs of rabies in wild animals are extremely variable; some animals may become bold or aggressive, or act sick, while other may appear perfectly normal.
- Laboratory tests of the animal's brain are the only way to confirm that an animal has rabies.

How is rabies transmitted?

- Rabies is transmitted when the virus, which is present in the saliva of an infected animal, penetrates the skin, usually through a bite. A healthcare provider should be consulted anytime a bite breaks the skin.
- Bites from bats can be very difficult to detect and may go unnoticed. If there is any chance that physical contact with a bat occurred (this includes finding a bat in the room of an unattended child, or a sleeping child or adult) the bat should be captured and tested for rabies.
- Rabies can also be transmitted if a scratch, open wound, or mucous membrane of the eyes, nose, or mouth is contaminated with saliva from a rabid animal, but this is uncommon.
- A person cannot get rabies simply by petting an animal nor can it be transmitted by an animal or person being sprayed by a skunk.

Why do a Chihuahua and a Great Dane get the same dose of rabies vaccine?

The dose of rabies vaccine is regulated to achieve a protective immune response within each animal. The amount of rabies antigen required to provide immunity does not change with an animal's weight. Therefore, regardless of whether a Chihuahua is being vaccinated or a Great Dane, the dose is the same.

Why are rabies antibody titers not accepted in place of rabies vaccination?

There is no antibody titer level that is known to provide protection in animals against rabies virus exposure. In addition, there are factors other than antibody level that are important in immunity to rabies. Because of this, a rabies titer cannot be accepted in place of rabies vaccination to prove that an animal is protected against rabies.

Why does the State require quarantine on certain animals that are bitten or exposed to a rabid animal?

- Once a domestic animal is exposed to the rabies virus, the amount of time until clinical signs develop (incubation period) can range from 2 to 26 weeks, depending on the location of the bite and amount of virus that enters the body. Most domestic animals show clinical signs and die within 3 to 12 weeks.
- A quarantine placed on domestic animals that are not currently vaccinated for rabies will minimize contact between the exposed animal and people and other animals, thereby reducing the likelihood that the virus will spread should the exposed animal develop rabies.

Why does the State require that a pet animal that bites someone be confined and observed for 10 days?

A domestic animal cannot transmit the rabies virus to humans or other animals until the virus is present in the saliva, which occurs toward the end of the incubation period. Once the disease has progressed to this stage in domestic animals, the animal will show clinical signs of rabies within 10 days.

Why may the State require that wild animals be euthanized and tested for rabies if they bite a person?

- It is unknown if wild animals can be effectively vaccinated for rabies.
- Because the signs of rabies in wild animals are variable, it is impossible to tell if they have rabies simply by observing them.
- The incubation period for rabies in wild animals is variable and often unknown.

How can I protect myself from getting rabies?

If you are bitten by a potentially rabid animal or believe that you might have come into contact with the saliva of a rabid animal, consult your physician immediately for medical advice. While rabies is a fatal disease if left untreated, there is safe and effective treatment if given soon after exposure. The current series of post-exposure injections is less painful and intensive than in the past. In addition to an injection of human rabies immune globulin given on the first day of treatment, a series of four vaccinations are administered in the arm on treatment days 0, 3, 7, and 14 (the first day of rabies treatment is referred to as day 0).

If you think you may have been exposed to a rabid animal or have any questions about your risk of contracting rabies, please call the Minnesota Department of Health at 651-201-5414 or toll-free at 877-676-5414. If you have any questions about your pet or livestock that may have been exposed to rabies, please call the Minnesota Board of Animal Health at 651-201-6808.