

MANAGING YOUR RABIES

What Is Rabies?

Rabies is an infection caused by the rabies virus. People get the virus after being bitten by an infected animal. Rabies exists mainly in wildlife, most frequently in skunks, raccoons, bats, and foxes. Pets including cats and dogs can also get it.

Only about two cases occur yearly in the United States, most caused by wild animal bites. Rabies is more common in developing countries.

What Causes Rabies?

The cause is the virus named rhabdovirus in saliva of infected animals.

What Are the Symptoms of Rabies?

The time from infection with the virus to first symptoms averages 35 to 65 days. First symptoms may be general, such as fever, headache, and feeling down. Also, loss of appetite, nausea, and pain or numbness at the bite site may last for the first 3 to 4 days.

Later, nervous system symptoms occur, including being agitated and restless with extreme hyperactivity, with bizarre behavior and calm periods. Hallucinations, muscle spasms, and paralysis may also occur. The fear of water (hydrophobia) occurs during this stage.

Unfortunately, if rabies isn't treated soon after exposure, it almost always leads to coma, convulsions, and death, usually by the 4th to 7th day after onset of symptoms.

How Is Rabies Diagnosed?

A health care provider will examine the wound and do blood tests to check for infection, but the only sure way to diagnose if the animal has rabies is to look for the presence of the virus in the

animal's brain. The animal may be captured and killed so that its brain can be checked for the presence of rabies virus.

How Is Rabies Treated?

All bite wounds should be cleaned immediately with soap and water and in the emergency room with povidone-iodine or something similar. Then, treatment depends on the risk of rabies. For simple dog or cat bites, the animal is observed for 10 days and, if it's healthy and not showing rabid behaviors, no treatment is needed. For an animal with rabid behavior, the health care provider will start treatment with human rabies immune globulin (HRIG) and human diploid cell rabies vaccine (HDCV).

HRIG is given once with half the dose usually injected near the wound and the other half given as a shot into a muscle. HDCV is given in five doses on days 0, 3, 7, 14, and 28. Treatment should continue even if local reactions to the vaccine occur.

A tetanus booster may also be given.

DOs and DON'Ts in Managing Rabies

- ✓ **DO** ask your health care provider or emergency room staff to tell state and local health department and animal control agencies about your animal bite.
- ✓ **DO** realize that the animal that bit you should be isolated. Cats and dogs are usually watched for 10 days for signs of rabies.
- ✓ **DO** remember that animal bites occurring outside the United States should be considered high risk for rabies. Get prompt medical care.
- ✓ **DO** realize that most rabid animals are weak, agitated, and dangerous.
- ✓ **DO** go to the closest emergency department if you have an animal bite.

✓ **DO** call your health care provider if you have a reaction (e.g., pain, swelling) to rabies vaccine.

⊗ **DON'T** forget that most rabid animals have odd behavior. They may approach people, drool from the mouth, and seem weak. They may attack anything that moves.

FROM THE DESK OF

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact the following source:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Tel: (800) 311-3435; Website:
<http://www.cdc.gov>

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