

What is rabies and what causes it?

Rabies is a severe, viral disease that can affect all mammals, including humans. Infection results in damage to the nervous system. The disease almost always ends in death. Rabies occurs worldwide. In many developing countries, unvaccinated dogs and other canines (e.g., foxes, coyotes) are the primary reservoir of the virus. In the U.S., wildlife species are the primary reservoir.

What animals get rabies?

All mammals can get rabies. Most cases in domestic animals species occur in cats, dogs, cattle, and horses; less commonly cases have occurred in guinea pigs, rabbits and a miniature pig. In wildlife, raccoons, skunks, mongoose, and bats are major reservoirs.

How can my animal get rabies?

Rabies is most commonly spread among animals by the bite (**direct contact**) of an infected animal whose saliva contains the virus. The virus is not thought to be spread by blood, urine or feces.

How does rabies affect my animal?

The rabies virus affects the brain of animals. Signs of disease involve changes in behavior, such as unusual aggression, friendliness or fearfulness. Other signs include restlessness, paralysis of their legs, difficulty swallowing, drooling and a change in the sound of their voice. Affected animals overreact to stimuli such as noises or lights. Any animal infected with rabies will die in 7 to 10 days.

Can I get rabies?

Yes. People primarily get rabies from the bite (**direct contact**) of an infected animal. Less commonly, exposure to the virus occurs by entry of saliva, brain or spinal cord fluid of an infected animal into cuts or breaks in the skin or mucous membranes (e.g., eyes, nose, mouth). Rare exposures have occurred under special situations, such as aerosol in laboratory settings or organ transplantation.

In most human cases, signs of rabies develop 1 to 3 months after exposure. Early symptoms include fever, headache, itching at the site of the bite, confusion and abnormal behavior. Hypersensitivity to light and sound, and difficulty swallowing can also occur. Once signs of disease begin, recovery is very rare. Death usually occurs within 2 to 10 days. Fortunately, treatment before signs develop is highly effective and life-saving.

Who should I contact, if I suspect rabies?

In Animals – Contact your veterinarian immediately.

In Humans – Contact your physician immediately.

How can I protect my animal from rabies?

Prevention is the best way to stop rabies. Animals should be vaccinated for rabies and kept away from wildlife. Bats caught by cats should be sent in for testing. Dogs, cats or ferrets that have bitten humans and show no signs of illness may be observed for rabies under veterinary supervision for 10 days. If signs of rabies develop during this time, the animal must be euthanized and tested.

How can I protect myself from rabies?

Do not contact, handle or feed wild animals. Wildlife or domestic animals with unusual behavior (e.g., nocturnal animals wandering around in the daytime or wildlife acting exceptionally friendly) should especially be avoided. Do not pick up bats that are laying on the ground.

If you are bitten by any animal, wash the wound well with soap and hot water. If you suspect rabies in the animal that bit you, contact your physician immediately, so post-exposure treatment can be started.

For More Information

CFSPH Technical Fact Sheets. Rabies at <http://www.cfsph.iastate.edu/DiseaseInfo/>

CDC website. Rabies at <http://www.cdc.gov/rabies/>

