



## **RABIES**

### **What is rabies?**

Rabies is a deadly, yet preventable, virus that infects the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord). It is nearly 100% fatal once clinical symptoms appear. Fortunately, only a few human cases are reported each year in the United States. All exposures to rabies should be reported to the Division of Public Health as soon as they occur.

### **Who gets rabies?**

Only mammals (warm blooded animals with fur, including humans) can get rabies. Among wild animals, rabies occurs most often in raccoons, bats, skunks, and foxes. Reptiles, amphibians, birds, fish, and insects do not carry rabies.

### **How is rabies spread?**

Rabies is most commonly transmitted to people who are bitten, scratched, or have their mouth or eyes exposed to the saliva or brain/nervous system tissue of an infectious animal.

### **What are the symptoms of rabies?**

In humans, the first symptoms of rabies may be similar to the flu, including weakness or discomfort, fever, or headache. There also may be discomfort, prickling, or an itching sensation at the site of the bite. Symptoms then progress to cerebral dysfunction, anxiety, confusion, and agitation. As the disease progresses, the person may experience delirium, abnormal behavior, hallucinations, hydrophobia (fear of water), and insomnia.

### **How soon do symptoms appear?**

Symptoms of rabies typically develop two to three months after exposure. However, the development of symptoms can vary from one week to one year, depending upon factors such as the location of virus entry and the viral load.

### **What is the treatment for rabies?**

Once clinical signs of rabies appear, the disease is nearly always fatal, and treatment is typically supportive. Rabies Postexposure Prophylaxis (PEP) can be administered following an exposure to a confirmed or suspected rabid animal and will prevent rabies from developing. In the United States, PEP consists of a regimen of one dose of immune globulin (IG) and four doses of rabies vaccine over a 14-day period. Rabies immune globulin and the first dose of rabies vaccine should be administered as soon as possible following exposure. Additional doses should then be administered on days 3, 7, and 14 after the first vaccination.



## What should you do if an animal bites or scratches you?

1. Wash the wound with soap and water as soon as possible.
2. People should seek medical attention to have the wound evaluated and treated.
3. Without delay, the health care provider, victim, or parent/guardian should contact the Delaware Division of Public Health (DPH), Office of Infectious Disease Epidemiology at 1-888-295-5156 or submit a potential human exposure to rabies report found on <https://dhss.delaware.gov/dph/dpc/rabies.html> to determine whether rabies treatment is needed. An epidemiologist is available 24/7.

In Delaware, a dog, cat, or ferret that bites a human must undergo a mandatory 10-day quarantine period. If the animal lives beyond the tenth day, it was not shedding the rabies virus when the bite occurred. If the animal develops symptoms or dies before the tenth day, it can be tested for rabies. If the test is positive, a human bite victim will still have enough time to receive post-exposure vaccinations and prevent the disease.

## What can a person or community do to prevent the spread of rabies?

DPH recommends that individuals take the following steps to prevent rabies exposure:

- All dogs, cats, and ferrets 6 months of age and older are required by Delaware law to be vaccinated against rabies by a licensed veterinarian. Vaccinated pets act as a barrier between wild animals and people to keep the rabies virus from spreading.
- Keep pets indoors and do not let them roam free.
- Keep your pet's food and water bowls inside to not attract wild and stray animals.
- Do not touch, handle, or feed wild, feral, or unfamiliar animals, including cats and dogs, even if they appear friendly. The risk of rabies in wildlife is significant.
- Spaying or neutering pets may reduce the tendency to roam or fight and be exposed.
- Keep your garbage securely covered.
- Keep bats and raccoons out of houses by capping chimneys with screens and blocking openings in attics, basements, and porches.
- Consider vaccinating livestock and horses; consult with your veterinarian.

## Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/rabies/>

World Health Organization, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail>

Division of Public Health, Report of Potential Exposure to Rabies, <https://redcap.dhss.delaware.gov/surveys/?s=F7EAFEHE9W>

**Office of Infectious Disease Epidemiology**  
**24/7 Emergency Contact Number: 1-888-295-5156**

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