

# Rabies



## What is rabies?

Rabies is a fatal viral infection that attacks the brain and spinal cord. Rabies is found worldwide and kills more than 55,000 people and millions of animals each year. Rabies is most prevalent in Asia, Africa and Central/South America. In the United States, rabies has been reported in every state except Hawaii.

## Who in the family is at risk for rabies?

Rabies can affect all mammals (warm-blooded animals) including people. In the United States, rabies mainly affects raccoons, skunks, foxes and bats. Historically, humans are at greatest risk for acquiring rabies from a dog because they account for the majority of animal bites reported in the country. Cats are also capable of transmitting rabies to people through bites along with any other infected animal.

## How is rabies transmitted?

Rabies is transmitted in the saliva of a rabid animal. The rabies virus is spread through saliva during bite wounds or direct contact with mucus membranes (mouth, inside of nose, eyes). The virus enters through the bite wound, and travels up the nerves into the brain. From the brain, the virus moves back down the nerves to the salivary glands and is present in the saliva of the infected host.

## How do I know if my pet may be infected with rabies?

Symptoms are usually associated with odd and inappropriate behavior ultimately leading to depression, coma and death. Dogs who are usually gentle and obedient may become aggressive and out of control. Confident, self-assured pets may become timid and fearful. The stereotypic picture of a rabid dog frothing at the mouth is due to paralysis of the throat muscles resulting in the inability to swallow. Death usually occurs within 10 days of showing symptoms. Infections in people also involve the central nervous system and once signs are present, the disease is almost always fatal.

## Is rabies treatable?

Unfortunately, **rabies is a non-treatable, fatal, zoonotic disease**. Any person bitten by an animal known to be, or thought to be infected with rabies, receives post-exposure treatment consisting of a series of anti-rabies prophylaxis (injections). The amount of time before clinical signs appear can vary from a few days to a few months; this is why many countries require a six-month quarantine when moving pets into the country. A vaccinated pet that has bitten a person will usually be quarantined and observed by local authorities or a person of their designation for 10 days. If the rabies virus is present in the dog or cat's saliva, it must have already infected the brain, and so the pet will show clinical signs of the rabies virus within 10 days. Definitive testing for the rabies virus requires direct examination of brain tissue after euthanasia or death. Local officials usually euthanize unvaccinated pets that have possibly been exposed to the virus, or have bitten a human, due to public safety concerns. These recommendations vary by state. Please check with your local health department for more information.

---

For additional information, please contact your Banfield medical team.

## What can you do to protect the entire family from rabies?

Vaccination of your cats, ferrets and dogs is the most effective strategy to protect your family from the rabies virus and will help control this infectious disease in the mammal population. The rabies vaccine is required by law in all 50 of the United States for dogs and cats (some states require vaccination of other pets as well). Different areas of the United States may require different schedules for vaccinating pets. Ask your hospital team about your state, county and local vaccination guidelines.

In addition to vaccination, there are several things you can do to protect your pet and family from rabies:

- Maintain control of your pets by keeping cats and ferrets indoors and keeping dogs under direct supervision.
- Enjoy wild animals from afar. Do not handle, feed, or unintentionally attract wild animals with open garbage cans, pet food or litter.
- Remind your children never to handle unfamiliar animals, wild or domestic, even if they appear friendly.
- Finally, treat all bite wounds as a serious matter and seek proper care from your Banfield veterinarian for your pet family and your personal physician for your human family.

