



Rabies

What is rabies?

Rabies is a very serious and usually fatal disease caused by one of a number of rabies viruses. The virus infects the brain and nervous system of mammals and is fatal to humans if the disease is not prevented with vaccines or shots given soon after exposure.

Symptoms of the disease include headache, fever, increasing difficulty in swallowing, excessive drooling, muscle spasm or weakness, and strange behavior. The majority of people with rabies die of the disease.

Any mammal can be infected by the virus. In B.C., only bats carry the rabies virus and other animals are rarely infected. In other parts of Canada and North America, rabies can be carried by other species such as raccoons, skunks, foxes and coyotes. Globally, unvaccinated, dogs are the most common carrier of rabies virus.

What are the symptoms of rabies in animals?

Animals with rabies may act very strange. Two types of behavior seen in animals with rabies are 'furious' and 'dumb'. The furious form causes some animals to show aggression, while the dumb form results in animals being sick and lethargic.

Symptoms of rabies in animals include paralysis, especially of the hind, limbs and throat muscles.

Bats are usually only seen at night. Infected bats may be seen during the day. Infected bats may just appear weak and lose their ability to fly.

What should I do if I have been exposed to rabies?

If you are bitten or scratched by an animal that may have rabies or seems sick and behaves strangely, you should do the following:

1. Wash the wound well with soap and warm water under moderate pressure for at least 5 minutes and then flush thoroughly with water. This greatly reduces the chance of infection.
2. Seek medical care from your doctor or local public health unit right away.

It is crucial to begin prevention treatment for rabies as soon as possible. It typically takes from 3 to 8 weeks

before rabies symptoms start. If you wait until the symptoms appear, it is usually too late to start effective medical treatment. If there is any chance that you may have been exposed to the rabies virus, contact your local public health unit or doctor. They will be able to decide if you need rabies prevention treatment.

What is the treatment for rabies exposure?

Prevention treatment is only successful if started before symptoms appear. It involves getting both rabies immune globulin and the rabies vaccine.

Rabies Immune Globulin:

- Rabies Immune Globulin (RabIg) is rabies antibodies taken from donated human blood. It is given once, usually at the same time as the first dose of the rabies vaccine. RabIg is given by needle into the area(s) of the bite or scratch and in a different place on your body than the vaccine.

Rabies Vaccine:

- If you have never received the rabies vaccine before, you will get 4 doses or shots in the upper arm. If you have a weakened immune system you will get 5 doses. The vaccine makes your immune system produce antibodies against the rabies virus. Antibodies are proteins that help to fight infection.
- If you have received a full series of rabies vaccine in the past, you will get 2 shots of rabies vaccine. These will boost your antibodies against rabies.

Possible Reactions after Treatment

Common reactions to rabies immune globulin may include soreness or stiffness where the shot was given. Fever, headache, feeling unwell, rash, or chills may also occur.

Common reactions to the rabies vaccine may include soreness, redness, swelling and itching where the shot was given. Fever, nausea, headache, muscle aches, fatigue, and dizziness may also occur.

Report serious or unexpected reactions to your public health nurse or doctor.

Who should not get the rabies immune globulin and rabies vaccine?

Anyone who has been exposed to the rabies virus will receive the rabies vaccine and immune globulin. Speak with a public health nurse or doctor if you have had a life-threatening reaction to eggs or egg products.

How can rabies be prevented?

- Vaccinate your cat, dog, or ferret against rabies and keep its immunization up to date.
- If your pet has contact with a bat, consult your public health unit and veterinarian.
- If you find a dead bat, do not touch it. The rabies virus could enter broken skin.
- If you have come into physical contact with a live bat which can be captured, you can do the following:
 1. Contact a wildlife professional or pest control company to have someone capture it; your local public health unit may be able to suggest someone to help.
 2. If no one is available to capture the bat, you may try to capture the bat without touching it so it can be tested for rabies.
 - If the bat is inside, close all doors and windows in the area.
 - Put on a hat, leather gloves, a long-sleeved jacket, and pants.
 - Without touching the bat, use a shoebox, coffee can, cooking pot or similar container to cover the bat.
 - Slide a piece of cardboard underneath to cover the opening.
 - Place the covered container in a cool place away from human or pet contact.
 - Do not kill the bat.
 - Contact the public health unit for further instructions.
 - Clean the container with boiling water.
- If a bat is in your home or other enclosed space where people also go, do not attempt to capture the bat.
 1. Close the door and open the windows to let the bat fly out on its own. Leave the room until the bat escapes.
 2. If this is not possible, contact a wildlife professional or pest control company to have someone capture it.

- If bats are in your attic, contact your nearest Ministry of Environment office for advice or visit www.env.gov.bc.ca/epd/ipmp/publications/brochures/bats.htm.
- If you are travelling for a month or more to a developing country where rabies often can be found in different animals, consider being vaccinated for rabies before you leave. Get advice at a travel clinic.
- If you are attacked or bitten by any animal outside of B.C., you should get medical advice about rabies prevention treatment, no matter how long since you were bitten.
- If you receive shots for rabies exposure in another country, you should get information about the products used, including copies of the immune globulin and vaccines labels. Show them to your public health nurse or doctor in B.C. to make sure they are adequate. Consider returning home to Canada for medical attention.

Mature Minor Consent

It is recommended that parents or guardians and their children discuss consent for immunization. Efforts are first made to seek parental/guardian or representative consent prior to immunization. However, children under the age of 19, who are able to understand the benefits and possible reactions for each vaccine and the risk of not getting immunized, can legally consent to or refuse immunizations.

For more HealthLink BC File topics, visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca/healthfiles/index.stm or your local public health unit.

Click on www.HealthLinkBC.ca or call **8-1-1** for non-emergency health information and services in B.C.

For deaf and hearing-impaired assistance, call 7-1-1 in B.C.

Translation services are available in more than 130 languages on request.



ImmunizeBC



BC Centre for Disease Control
AN AGENCY OF THE PROVINCIAL HEALTH SERVICES AUTHORITY