

Rabies

What is rabies?

Rabies is a very serious and almost always fatal disease caused by the rabies virus. It affects the brain and nervous system and spreads between mammals through contact with saliva or nervous tissue, usually through a bite. In humans, rabies can be prevented by immunization soon after exposure.

Any mammal can be infected by the virus but a limited number of animal species act as carriers of the virus. In B.C., only bats are known to carry rabies virus. Other animals are rarely infected. In other parts of Canada and North America, strains of rabies virus are carried in other species such as raccoons, skunks, foxes and coyotes. Worldwide, unimmunized dogs are the most common carriers of rabies.

What are the symptoms of rabies in people?

Symptoms of rabies include:

- Prodromal symptoms including fever, chills, fatigue, weakness, headache
- Pain, tingling and itching at the site of an animal bite
- Anxiety and/or confusion
- Difficulty swallowing
- Fear of water
- Excessive drooling
- Muscle spasms or weakness
- Unusual behaviour such as agitation and combativeness
- Paralysis

Once symptoms of rabies appear, death is almost certain.

What are the symptoms of rabies in animals?

Animals with rabies may act unusually. They may show a variety of signs, including:

- Fearfulness or aggression
- Lethargy
- Appearing unusually tame
- Excessive drooling
- Difficulty swallowing
- Paralysis
- Staggering
- Seizures

Infected animals die within 10 days of becoming sick.

Bats infected with rabies may also act abnormally. Bats are usually active at night, so if you see one during the day, it may be sick. Weakness and lack of flight may be a result of rabies or other infections such as White Nose Syndrome. Some bats with rabies may appear to behave normally.

Some of the signs described above may have other causes including other illnesses, self-protection, heat, stress, hunger and becoming accustomed to humans.

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

If you have been bitten or scratched by a bat or another animal that seems sick, do the following:

1. Wash the wound well with soap and warm water under moderate pressure for at least 15 minutes. This greatly reduces the chance of infection
2. Seek medical care from a health care provider or your local public health unit right away

After exposure to a rabies virus, it is crucial to begin prevention treatment for rabies as soon as possible. It can take 3 to 8 weeks before rabies symptoms start in humans or longer. Even if a long time has passed since the exposure, contact your local public health unit or health care provider. They will assess whether you need rabies prevention treatment.

What is the treatment for rabies exposure?

Rabies prevention treatment only works if it is started before symptoms appear. It usually involves getting both rabies immune globulin and the rabies vaccine.

For more information visit [HealthLinkBC File #07b Rabies immune globulin and vaccine](#).

How can rabies be prevented?

Vaccinate your pets

Talk to your veterinarian about vaccinating your cat, dog or ferret against rabies and keeping vaccinations up to date. Even indoor cats should be vaccinated, as they may escape or encounter bats indoors. If your pet has physical contact with a bat, consult your veterinarian.

Avoid contact with bats

If you find a dead or sick bat:

- Do not touch it with your bare hands
- Wear waterproof gloves or a double layer of plastic, or use a tool like a trowel or spade to move it

If you have physical contact with a live bat that can be captured, you can do the following:

- 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
- 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 by following these steps:
 - 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 you or your pets have not had physical contact with a bat and it is in your home or other enclosed space where people or pets also go, do not attempt to capture the bat.

- Close the door and open the windows to let the bat fly out on its own. Leave the room until the bat escapes
- If this is not possible, contact a wildlife professional or pest control company to have someone capture it

If bats live in your attic or home, contact the BC Community Bat Program at 1 855 9BC-BATS (1-855-922-2287) or your nearest Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development office for advice. Also visit www.bcbats.ca.

Take precautions when you travel

If you plan to travel for a month or more to a developing country where rabies is common, consider getting vaccinated 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 on site and again when you return to B.C., even if time has passed.

If you are immunized following a rabies exposure in another country, get information about the products used, including copies of the immune globulin and vaccine labels. Show them to your health care provider in B.C. to make sure they are adequate. Consider returning home to Canada for medical attention.



BC Centre for Disease Control
Provincial Health Services Authority

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