



Rabies

What is rabies?

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

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 is present in other species such as raccoons, skunks, foxes and coyotes. Worldwide, unimmunized dogs are the most common carrier of rabies virus.

What are the symptoms of rabies in people?

Symptoms of the disease include:

- headache;
- fever;
- increasing difficulty in swallowing;
- excessive drooling;
- muscle spasm or weakness; and
- strange behaviour.

The majority of people with rabies die of the disease.

What are the symptoms of rabies in animals?

Animals with rabies may act strangely. They may show a variety of signs, including fearfulness, aggression, lethargy, appearing unusually tame, excessive drooling, difficulty swallowing, paralysis, staggering and seizures. Infected animals usually die within 10 days from when they first appear sick.

Bats infected with rabies may also act strangely. Bats are usually active at night, so bats seen during the day may not be normal. Weakness and lack of flight may be a result of rabies infection. Some bats with rabies may appear to behave totally normally.

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

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

If you are bitten or scratched by a bat or another animal that seems sick and behaves strangely, this is termed a “rabies exposure”. You should 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 any type of infection.
2. Seek medical care from your health care provider or local public health unit right away.

If you have been exposed to the rabies virus, 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 in humans but can be much longer. If you wait until the symptoms appear, it is usually too late to start effective medical treatment. If you think you have been exposed to the rabies virus, contact your local public health unit or health care provider, no matter how long since you were exposed. They will assess if 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 involves getting both rabies immune globulin and the rabies vaccine.

For more information see [HealthLinkBC File #07b Rabies Immune Globulin and Vaccine](#).

How can rabies be prevented?

Vaccinate your pets

Consult with your veterinarian to vaccinate your cat, dog, or ferret against rabies and keep it up to date. Even indoor cats should be vaccinated as they may escape or they can come into contact with bats that enter houses. If your pet has physical contact with a bat, consult your veterinarian.

Avoid contact with bats

If you find a dead bat, do not touch it with your bare hands. Wear waterproof gloves or a double layer of plastic to handle.

If you have come into physical contact with a live bat which 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.
 - 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 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 your nearest Ministry of Environment office or the BC Community Bat Programs for advice. Also visit www.bcbats.ca or call toll free at 1-855-9BC-BATS (1-855-922-2287).

Take precautions when you travel

If you are travelling for a month or more to a developing country where rabies often can be found in different animals, consider being immunized 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 are immunized following a rabies exposure in another country, you should 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.



ImmunizeBC



BC Centre for Disease Control
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