

# Rabies

## What is rabies?

Rabies is a very serious and almost always fatal disease caused by a 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.

The virus can infect any mammal. In B.C., only bats carry rabies virus and other animals are rarely infected. In other parts of Canada and North America, strains of rabies virus are 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
- 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 but not always act aggressively. 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. If you see bats during the day, they may not be normal. 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 totally 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 a bat or another animal that seems sick and behaves strangely bites or scratches you, you may have been exposed to rabies. 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

After exposure to a 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 a 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 or sick bat, do not touch it with your bare hands. Wear waterproof gloves or a double layer of plastic or use a tool such as a trowel or spade to handle it.

**If you had 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 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](http://www.bcbats.ca).

### 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 on site and again upon your return to B.C., no matter how long since you were bitten.

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.



ImmunizeBC



BC Centre for Disease Control  
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