

HUMAN RABIES

What is rabies?

Rabies is a rare but severe viral illness that affects the central nervous system of mammals. The disease is almost 100% fatal. Since 1990, the number of reported cases in the United States has ranged from 1 to 7 cases annually.

What are the symptoms of rabies?

Early symptoms of rabies in humans are nonspecific, consisting of fever, headache, anxiety, general malaise, and sometimes pain at the site of exposure (bite or scratch). As the disease progresses, neurological symptoms appear and may include confusion, slight or partial paralysis, excitability, hallucinations, agitation, over production of saliva, difficulty swallowing, and hydrophobia (fear of water). Death usually occurs within a couple of weeks after the onset of neurological symptoms.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually appear from 3 - 8 weeks after exposure, but the incubation period (time between exposure and development of symptoms) can range as widely as 9 days to several years after exposure. Various factors, such as wound location and severity (i.e., the closer to the brain, the shorter the incubation), as well as, amount and type of virus introduced, all play a role in determining when symptoms appear.

How is rabies spread?

The virus is found in the saliva of an infected animal. People get rabies from the bite of an animal with rabies (a rabid animal). It is also possible, but quite rare, that people may get rabies if infectious material from a rabid animal, such as saliva, gets directly into their eyes, nose, mouth, or a wound. Person-to-person transmission of rabies has only occurred through tissue transplantation.

What animals carry rabies?

Only mammals can get rabies. The most common wild reservoirs (carriers of the infection) are raccoons, skunks, foxes, coyotes and bats. Although rare, domestic animals such as dogs, cats, ferrets and cattle can become infected and spread rabies. In the U.S., different regions have different wild animal reservoirs. Almost all human rabies cases acquired in the U.S. since 1980 have been due to bat rabies. Cases outside of the U.S. are usually the result of a bite from a rabid dog.

In Washington, bats are the only carrier of rabies (about 1% of the bat population is positive). No rabies has been found in raccoons, skunks, foxes or coyotes in this state.

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What should I do if an animal (other than a bat) bites me?

- Wash the site of any animal bite thoroughly with soap and water.
- Contact your doctor and Snohomish Health District to determine the potential for rabies exposure.
- Check the tetanus vaccination status of the person who was bitten. If it has been more than 5 years since the last vaccination, a booster of Td or Tdap is recommended.

What should I do if I come in contact with a bat?

People usually know when they have been bitten or scratched by a bat. However, because bats have small teeth which may leave marks that are not easily seen, there are situations in which you should seek medical advice even in the absence of an obvious bite wound. For example, if you awaken and find a bat in your room, see a bat in the room of an unattended child, or see a bat near a mentally impaired or intoxicated person, you should consider this a potential exposure. If you are bitten by a bat, suspect any direct exposure, or if infectious material (such as saliva) from a bat gets into your eyes, nose, mouth, or a wound:

- For a known exposure, such as a bite or scratch, wash the affected area thoroughly with soap and water.
- **Try to safely capture the bat and immediately contact Snohomish Health District to arrange for testing.** Recommendations for post exposure prophylaxis (PEP) are based on the possibility of direct exposure to a rabid or potentially rabid bat.
- Contact Snohomish Health District to determine potential for exposure. Call Communicable Disease Surveillance and Response at 425.339.5278, Monday-Friday, 8:00 AM- 5:00PM.
- Seek medical advice immediately.

People cannot get rabies just from seeing a bat in an attic, in a cave, or at a distance. In addition, people cannot get rabies from having contact with bat guano (feces), blood, or urine, or from touching a bat on its fur (even though bats should **never** be handled).

How can I safely capture a bat in my home?

Bats should only be captured if direct exposure to someone is known or suspected. You can either call for professional help, or capture the bat yourself, using the following method:

1. When the bat lands, approach it slowly, while wearing leather or heavy duty work gloves. **NEVER** handle a bat with bare hands.
2. Place a small box or coffee can over the bat and slide a piece of cardboard under the container to trap the bat inside.
3. Tape the cardboard securely to the container.
4. Contact Snohomish Health District to make arrangements for rabies testing. If it is after hours, place the sealed container that contains the bat into the refrigerator until you have contacted public health for further instructions.

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Communicable Disease Surveillance & Response

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What treatment will I receive if I am potentially exposed to rabies?

In the United States, post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) consists of one dose of rabies immune globulin (RIG) and four doses of rabies vaccine over a 14-day period. RIG and five doses of rabies vaccine are recommended for individuals with a weakened immune system. Rabies immune globulin and the first dose of rabies vaccine should be given as soon as possible after exposure. Additional doses of rabies vaccine should be given on days 3, 7, and 14 after the first vaccination. The additional fifth dose is given on day 28 for immune compromised individuals. Current vaccines are relatively painless with minimal side effects, and are given only in your arm, like a flu or tetanus shot.

What can I do to reduce the risk of rabies exposure?

- Do not handle wild animals, especially bats, for any reason. If you find a wild animal, either dead or alive, leave it alone and call animal control or a local animal rescue agency.
- Do not keep wild animals as pets.
- Teach your children never to touch or handle unfamiliar animals, wild or domestic, even if they appear friendly. Have your children tell an adult if they come into contact with or find a bat anywhere.
- Prevent bats from entering living quarters or occupied spaces in homes, churches, schools, summer camps and other areas where they might come into contact with people and pets.
- Have all bats, especially if dead, sick, or easily captured, tested for rabies if direct exposure to people or pets occurs or is suspected.
- Pets may get rabies if bitten by a rabid animal. Protect your pets and yourself by getting them vaccinated. Consult your veterinarian for vaccine recommendations.
- When traveling abroad, avoid direct contact with wild animals and be especially careful around dogs in developing countries.

Rabies is a Washington State reportable disease and must be reported to your local health department. In Snohomish County, contact Communicable Disease Surveillance and Response at 425.339.5278, Monday-Friday, 8:00 AM- 5:00PM.

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