

Rabies

Environmental Health – Factsheet

What is rabies?

Rabies is a viral infection that can be transmitted from animals to people. It is transmitted through saliva (spit) of an infected animal. The disease attacks the nervous system and eventually affects the brain. Once symptoms appear, rabies is almost always fatal.

How is rabies spread?

Rabies is spread through close contact with the saliva (spit) of infected animals. People are usually infected after a rabid animal bites them. Rabies can also be spread when saliva from a rabid animal gets into a fresh cut, wound or intact mucous membranes such as the eyes, nose and mouth. Person-to-person transmission is rare and occurs almost always as a result of organ or tissue transplant. While very rare, it's also possible that rabies can be spread in the air in caves infested with bats. Children are at greater risk because they are more likely to approach sick or dead animals out of curiosity and lack of knowledge.

Who can get infected?

People and all warm-blooded animals (mammals) can be infected with rabies. This includes pets such as cats, dogs and ferrets; farm animals such as cows and horses; and wild animals such as skunks, foxes, bats and raccoons.

What are the symptoms of rabies in people?

Symptoms generally take 20 to 60 days to appear after coming in contact with the rabies virus, but this period can vary from several days to years. There is often discomfort or pain at the exposure site (bite). Symptoms may be flu-like and include fever, headache and weakness. As the disease progresses, the infected person may experience increased difficulty in swallowing, excessive drooling, muscle spasms and unusual behaviour. Once a person begins to show signs of the disease, survival is rare.

What happens if I think I have rabies?

There is no specific treatment for rabies. Thoroughly cleansing the wound or bite immediately after

exposure is important to help prevent the onset of rabies. It's very important to seek medical attention within 24 hours if bitten or attacked by a strange-acting domestic or wild animal. Immunizations given after being exposed to the virus (called post-exposure prophylaxis) can be effective at preventing rabies. A health care provider will be able to decide if these shots are needed. Two products are used to prevent rabies from developing:

- One dose of rabies immune globulin that helps to neutralize the virus before it becomes established, followed by
- Four doses of rabies vaccine given over the next 14 days that will help a person's immune system make antibodies against the virus.

How do you protect yourself, your child and your pets from getting rabies?

- Seek medical attention within 24 hours after being bitten or attacked by a strange-acting domestic or wild animal.
- Vaccinate your pets against rabies and keep their rabies immunizations up-to-date.
- Don't let your pets roam free outdoors, especially at night.
- Avoid contact with wildlife and stray animals where possible and do not handle them, especially if they appear sick.
- Teach children never to approach unfamiliar or stray animals, even if they seem friendly or appear to be sick and need help.
- Do not keep wild animals as pets.
- Identify and cover potential places where wildlife, including bats, could enter your home, such as chimneys.
- Fill electrical and plumbing holes with stainless steel wool or caulking.
- Report any strange-acting wildlife, stray or dead animals found on your property to your local Conservation and Water Stewardship office or animal control office.

- Wear gloves and use shovels when removing dead animals from your property and thoroughly wash your hands after handling the carcass. Information on dead animal removal is available at:

<http://www.gov.mb.ca/health/publichealth/factsheets/disposing.pdf>

What about pet exposure to rabies?

If you think your pet has recently been exposed to rabies from another animal, isolate your pet immediately and do not handle it any more than necessary. Call your veterinarian to find out what to do with your pet. You can also contact Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (MAFRD) and speak to a provincial veterinarian who can provide information and recommendations, or call Health Links – Info Santé for advice and a referral to the appropriate person or organization.

If an animal suspected of carrying rabies requires euthanasia please refrain from shooting it in the head as the animal's brain is needed to test for the presence of rabies.

For more information...

If you need more general information about rabies, call:

- Health Links – Info Santé at 204-788-8200 (in Winnipeg) or toll-free (outside of Winnipeg) at 1-888-315-9257.
- MAFRD at 204-470-1108.

- Your local Conservation and Water Stewardship office.
- Your local public health office.
- Your local veterinary clinic.

Information is also available on the Manitoba Health website at www.gov.mb.ca/health.

Additional resources are available at:

- www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/tmp-pmv/info/rage-eng.php
- www.cdc.gov/rabies/
- www.bccdc.ca/dis-cond/a-z/_r/Rabies/overview/Rabies.htm
- www.gov.mb.ca/conservation/wildlife/disease/rabies.html
- <http://www.who.int/topics/rabies/en/>

To report human exposure to an animal suspected of having rabies, contact Health Links – Info Santé at 204-788-8200 (in Winnipeg) or toll-free (outside of Winnipeg) at 1-888-315-9257.

To report domestic animal exposure to or injury by an animal suspected of having rabies (where no human exposure has occurred) contact Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Development at 204-470-1108.