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What is rabies?

Rabies is a deadly disease that only affects mammals and is caused by a virus that attacks the nervous system. Once a person or animal starts showing clinical signs of rabies, survival is rare.

Who gets rabies?

Only mammals get rabies; birds, fish, reptiles and amphibians do not. Wild animals frequently diagnosed with rabies include raccoons, skunks and foxes. Cats are the most common domestic animal diagnosed with rabies. Rabbits, squirrels, rats and mice and small pets like gerbils and hamsters are rarely diagnosed with rabies. On average, 2 human cases of rabies are reported in the United States each year, most due to a bite from a dog while traveling to another country, or exposure to a bat while in this country. Virginia has reported 2 human cases of rabies since 2009.

Where is rabies found?

While any mammal can get rabies, the rabies virus is most commonly found in wild animals like raccoons, skunks and foxes. Bats may also carry the rabies virus.

How is rabies spread?

The rabies virus is in the saliva and the brain of rabid animals. The most common way rabies is transmitted is through the bite of an infected mammal. Rarely, rabies can be transmitted by getting saliva or brain tissue in the eyes, nose, mouth, or in an open wound.

What are the symptoms of rabies?

Animals that are ill with rabies may have signs including abnormal behavior, difficulty swallowing, poor balance, paralysis and seizures. The first symptoms of people ill with rabies can be very similar to flu, but symptoms quickly progress and may include prickling or itching sensation at the site of bite, anxiety, confusion, hallucinations, and insomnia. Once any mammal becomes ill with rabies, progression to death typically occurs rapidly.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

Symptoms in humans normally appear in two to eight weeks, but longer periods between exposure and the onset of symptoms have been reported. The acute period of disease typically ends after 2 to 10 days. Once clinical signs of rabies appear, the disease is nearly always fatal, and treatment is typically supportive.

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

If you are bitten, wash the wound thoroughly with soap and lots of water. If possible, capture the animal under a large box or can, or at least identify it before it runs away. Don't try to pick the animal up and don't damage the head of any animal that might need to be tested for rabies. Call an animal control or law enforcement officer to come get the animal. Notify your doctor immediately and explain how you got the bite. Most people know when they have been bitten by a bat, but there are situations in which you should seek medical advice even in the absence of an obvious bite wound. For example, if you wake up to 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, do not destroy or discard the bat. Call your local health department for advice.

How can I help prevent and control rabies?

- Have your veterinarian vaccinate your dogs, cats, ferrets, and selected livestock. Keep the vaccinations up-to-date. While rabies vaccines are labeled for use in a number of animals, in Virginia, rabies vaccinations are required for dogs and cats.
- If your pet is attacked or bitten by a wild animal, report it to the local health or animal control authorities and be prepared to assist with rabies exposure response activities such as booster vaccination and confinement.
- Limit the possibility of exposure by keeping your animals on your property. Don't let pets roam free.
- Do not leave garbage or pet food outside. It may attract wild or stray animals.
- Do not keep wild animals as pets. Enjoy all wild animals from a distance, even if they seem friendly. A rabid animal sometimes acts tame. If you see an animal acting strangely, report it to your local animal control department and do not approach it.
- Contact your local health department if you think you or your pet may have been exposed.

How can I learn more about rabies?

- If you have concerns about rabies, contact your healthcare provider.
- Call your local health department. A directory of local health departments is located at the [VDH Local Health Districts page](#).
- Visit the Virginia Department of Health's Rabies Control page at [the VDH page on rabies](#).
- Visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at [the CDC page on rabies](#).

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