

Commonly Asked Questions about Rabies for Animal Healthcare Personnel in Virginia

Local rabies contact information

County Health Department business hours phone number:

After hour's rabies reporting procedure:

1. WHO DO I CONTACT WITH CONCERNS ABOUT RABIES LAW AND IMMUNIZATION IN VIRGINIA?

Issues pertaining to human or domestic animal rabies, rabies immunization and rabies exposure should be directed to the local health department. A directory of Virginia's local health departments can be found at <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/local-health-districts/>.

2. IN VIRGINIA, FOR WHICH SPECIES IS A RABIES VACCINATION REQUIRED?

As per the *Code of Virginia* (specifically, section 3.2-6521) the owner of all dogs and cats 4 months of age or older shall have them vaccinated for rabies. Please note that this does **not** mean that owners of dogs and cats must wait until the animal is 4 months old, just that, by the time dogs and cats are 4 months of age or older, they must be vaccinated.

3. WHO IS AUTHORIZED TO ADMINISTER A RABIES VACCINE?

As per the *Code of Virginia* (specifically, section 3.2-6521), rabies vaccinations are to be administered by a licensed veterinarian or a licensed veterinary technician under the direct supervision of a veterinarian.

4. WHAT INFORMATION MUST BE INCLUDED ON A RABIES VACCINE CERTIFICATE, HOW LONG DO I NEED TO KEEP A CERTIFICATE AND IS A VETERINARIAN REQUIRED TO ISSUE A RABIES TAG ALONG WITH A CERTIFICATE?

Per the *Code of Virginia* (specifically, section 3.2-6529):

The rabies vaccination certificate shall include at a minimum the signature of the veterinarian, the animal owner's name and address, the species of the animal, the sex, the age, the color, the primary breed, whether or not the animal is spayed or neutered, the vaccination number, and expiration date. The rabies vaccination certificate shall indicate the locality where the animal resides.

Please note that “locality” as it is used in the language above refers to the county or independent city where the client resides. While the address of the client may indicate the county or independent city in which the client resides, there are instances where this may not be the case, particularly in more populated areas, and so a client’s locality is to be noted on all rabies certificates. For instance, a client whose address is, in part, “Richmond, Virginia” may live in Henrico county, Richmond City or Chesterfield county. Noting the independent city or county where the client resides helps your local treasurer determine whether or not to forward the rabies certificate information you provide to that office in regard to dogs that are vaccinated through your practice to another treasurer’s office for dog licensing purposes.

The Virginia Board of Veterinary Medicine (BVM) oversees the regulations associated with veterinary medical recordkeeping. Those regulations and contact information for the BVM be found at <http://www.dhp.virginia.gov/Boards/VetMed/>. **Currently, the BVM Regulations Governing the Practice of Veterinary Medicine instructs veterinarians to keep records “for a period of three years following the last office visit or discharge of such animal from a veterinary establishment.” This also applies to rabies certificates that are generated as a result of a rabies clinic. Veterinarians ARE NOT required to provide a rabies tag along with a rabies vaccination certificate.** While these types of tags may be helpful as they can provide a form of identification if the animal is ever lost, they are not required. The only required tag is the one a county treasurer’s office issues.

5. WHAT ARE THE AGE REQUIREMENTS FOR RABIES VACCINATION IN VIRGINIA?

See answer to #2.

6. FOLLOWING ADMINISTRATION OF THE INITIAL DOSE OF RABIES VACCINE, WHEN IS AN ANIMAL CONSIDERED TO BE “CURRENTLY VACCINATED”?

For rabies exposure response purposes, dogs and cats are not considered currently vaccinated until 28 days after the primary rabies vaccination. For general administrative purposes including licensure, the animal is considered vaccinated provided the owner can produce a current rabies certificate. Currently, the BVM Regulations Governing the Practice of Veterinary Medicine instruct veterinarians to clearly display the following information on a rabies certificate for an animal receiving a primary rabies vaccination: *“An animal is not considered immunized for at least 28 days after the initial or primary vaccination is administered.”* The entire text of these regulations can be found at <http://www.dhp.virginia.gov/Boards/VetMed/>.

7. WHAT ARE THE RABIES VACCINATION REQUIREMENTS FOR AN ANIMAL THAT ENTERS THE STATE FROM ANOTHER STATE OR COUNTRY?

Animal admission requirements in Virginia are overseen by the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. These requirements can be found at <https://www.vdacs.virginia.gov/animals-animal-admissions.shtml>. In general, people moving to Virginia must ensure that any dog or cat over four months of age is currently vaccinated for rabies and are responsible for any county or city licenses that are required for dogs and may be required for cats. Information about the requirements associated with importing dogs and selected other animals from another country can be found at <https://www.cdc.gov/importation/bringing-an-animal-into-the-united-states/index.html>.

8. CAN A 3-YEAR LABELED RABIES VACCINE BE SUBSTITUTED, AT THE VETERINARIAN'S DISCRETION, FOR A 1-YEAR LABELED RABIES VACCINE?

Veterinarians can use their discretion in regard to which of the rabies vaccines licensed for use in the US they use. No matter what the age at initial vaccination, the second vaccination should be administered within a year regardless of whether the initial vaccine had 1 year or 3 year duration of immunity. If vaccine approved by the USDA for 3 years duration of immunity is used, triennial booster vaccinations can be administered beginning with the second vaccination.

9. WHAT ARE REQUIREMENTS FOR VACCINATING AN ANIMAL THAT IS OVERDUE FOR A SCHEDULED RABIES VACCINATION?

There are no laws in Virginia that specifically address vaccinating animals overdue for a rabies vaccination. Virginia Department of Health recommendations in this regard are that if the animal is overdue for a booster vaccination, it does not have to start the series again. No matter how long overdue, if a vaccine labeled for 3 years duration is given, a certificate for 3 years can be written. However, an animal is not considered immunized for at least 28 days after the initial vaccination is administered, but with any subsequent vaccination the animal is considered current immediately.

10. CAN A RABIES TITER BE USED TO ESTABLISH "IMMUNITY"?

Rabies antibody titers are indicative of an animal's response to vaccine or infection. Titers do not directly correlate with protection because other immunologic factors also play a role in preventing rabies, and our abilities to measure and interpret those other factors are not well developed. Therefore, evidence of circulating rabies virus antibodies should not be used as a substitute for current vaccination in managing rabies exposures or determining the need for booster vaccinations in animals.

11. WHAT CONSTITUTES RABIES EXPOSURE IN AN ANIMAL?

Rabies is transmitted when the virus is introduced into bite wounds or when wet saliva or central nervous system tissue (CNS) enters into open wounds in the skin or mucous membranes like eyes, nose or mouth. Any circumstance where wet saliva or CNS tissue from a rabid or suspect rabid animal (see Virginia Guidelines for Rabies Prevention and Control at <https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/animal-contact-human-health/rabies-control/> for definitions) did have or may have had direct contact with mucous membranes or a break in the skin of a domestic animal is considered an exposure. The actual witnessing of a bite or attack by a rabid or suspect rabid animal is not necessary to define an exposure; however, a suspect or rabid animal needs to have been witnessed in close proximity to the exposed animal where, in the judgment of the health director or his designee, contact with the suspected rabid or rabid animal likely occurred. Any high risk or suspect rabid animal that has exposed a domestic animal and is not available for laboratory testing should be presumed to be rabid. Domestic animals that bite other domestic animals are not usually considered rabies suspects unless showing signs compatible with the disease. Veterinarians should report exposures to animals to their local health departments to receive guidance about how to proceed.

12. WHAT ACTION IS REQUIRED IN THE EVENT A *CURRENTLY VACCINATED* ANIMAL IS DETERMINED TO BE EXPOSED TO RABIES VIRUS?

Any currently immunized dog, cat, or ferret that is exposed to a proven or suspected rabid animal should receive an immediate booster dose of rabies vaccine from a licensed veterinarian and be confined for 45 days observation. The disposition of other animals that have or may have been exposed to rabies is at the discretion of the local health director. Veterinarians should report exposures to animals to their local health departments to receive guidance about how to proceed. A directory of local health departments can be found at <https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/local-health-districts/>.

13. WHAT ACTION IS REQUIRED IN THE EVENT A *NON-VACCINATED* ANIMAL IS DETERMINED TO BE EXPOSED TO RABIES VIRUS?

Any unvaccinated dog, or cat that may have been exposed to a proven or suspect rabid animal should be humanely euthanized unless the exposing animal tests negative for rabies. If the owner of an exposed dog, cat, or ferret is unwilling to euthanize it, the dog or cat should be placed in strict isolation. (The specific wording of the Code section 3.2-6522 that speaks to rabies exposure response to any dog or cat with no proof of current vaccination and is exposed is that the animal shall be isolated “for a period not to exceed six months at the expense of the owner or custodian in a manner and by a date certain as determined by the local health director.” Based on the language of the 2016 *Compendium of Animal Rabies Prevention and Control*, strict isolation, in most instances, will be up to 4 months in length.) A rabies vaccination is to be administered by a licensed veterinarian prior to release. (The *Code of Virginia* allows for the administration of rabies vaccine at the beginning of isolation.) The response to dogs and cats with expired rabies vaccines that are assessed as exposed to rabies is determined by the health department on a case by case basis, however, will likely result in the requirement for a booster vaccine followed by 45 days of confinement unless there is concern about the animal’s ability to respond to the vaccine. The disposition of other animals that have or may have been exposed to rabies is at the discretion of the local health director. Veterinarians should report exposures to animals to their local health departments to receive guidance about how to proceed. A directory of local health departments can be found at <https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/local-health-districts/>.

14. WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES FOR A *VACCINATED* ANIMAL THAT BITES A PERSON?

Any healthy dog, cat, or ferret (vaccinated or unvaccinated) that bites a person should be confined for 10 days observation. The response in regard to other animals that bite people is at the discretion of the local health director. Veterinarians should report bites to their local health department to receive guidance about how to proceed. A directory of local health departments can be found at <https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/local-health-districts/>.

15. WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES FOR AN *UNVACCINATED* ANIMAL THAT BITES A PERSON?

See #14

16. ARE THERE ANY REGULATIONS IN VIRGINIA THAT ALLOW A VETERINARIAN TO EXEMPT AN ANIMAL FROM THE LEGAL REQUIREMENT TO BE VACCINATED AGAINST RABIES?

Virginia's rabies regulations can be found at <https://law.lis.virginia.gov/admincode/title12/agency5/chapter105/>. These regulations, in part, provide for an exemption to rabies vaccinations for dogs and cats "if a vaccination would likely endanger the animal's life due to a previously diagnosed disease or other previously documented medical considerations as documented by a licensed veterinarian." A guidance document has been developed to assist veterinarians with the process of rabies vaccine exemptions which discusses the language of the law associated with exemptions and examples of certain conditions for which an exemption may be appropriate. A standard application form has also been developed for this process. These materials can be found at <https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/animal-contact-human-health/rabies-control/>. Veterinarians interested in applying for an exemption should discuss the process by which they can apply with their local health departments. Veterinarians are also encouraged to contact their local health departments to report exposures or if they have questions about any of the regulatory language. A directory of local health departments can be found at <https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/local-health-districts/>.

17. AT WHAT AGE IS IT NO LONGER NECESSARY TO VACCINATE AN ANIMAL AGAINST RABIES?

There is no upper age limit beyond which rabies vaccination is not required by law.

18. IS IT LEGAL TO ADMINISTER A RABIES VACCINE TO A HYBRID DOG OR CAT?

It is not illegal to vaccinate hybrid animals for rabies. USDA has not labeled any vaccines for use in hybrid animals. Veterinarians may choose to vaccinate hybrids as an extra-label use of a biologic. The American Veterinary Medical Association liability insurance program recommends that the administering veterinarian inform the owner that the vaccine is not approved for use in hybrid animal, no studies to prove the efficacy of the vaccine have been performed in hybrids and then note the extra-label use in the animal's medical record, including language explaining that public health officials may not recognize the vaccination, and have the owner initial the record.

19. AT THE STATE LEVEL, WHAT AUTHORITY DOES THE *COMPENDIUM of ANIMAL RABIES PREVENTION and CONTROL* CARRY?

While the well-respected national guidance document known as the *Compendium of Animal Rabies Prevention and Control* has helped to guide the language of and inform Virginia's rabies laws for many years, this document is not the law in Virginia.

20. RABIES IMMUNIZATION AND RABIES LAW RESOURCES IN VIRGINIA

- a. The Virginia Guidelines for Rabies Prevention and Control (with attachments including a list of laws in Virginia and rabies exposure algorithms) is available at: <https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/animal-contact-human-health/rabies-control/>.
- b. The Compendium of Animal Rabies Prevention and Control and associated materials, is available at: <http://www.nasphv.org/documentsCompendiaRabies.html> and is also available via the website for the Virginia Guidelines for Rabies Prevention and Control listed above.
- c. An electronic, searchable version of the *Code of Virginia* can be found at <https://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacode/>. Many laws pertaining to rabies can be found by entering the word "rabies or "rabid" into the search engine.
- d. An electronic version of the Rabies Regulations within the Virginia Administrative Code can be found at <https://law.lis.virginia.gov/admincode/title12/agency5/chapter105/>.