

Commonly Asked Questions about Rabies for Animal Healthcare Personnel in Virginia



Local rabies contact information

Local Health Department business hours phone number:

After hour's rabies reporting procedure:

1. RABIES VACCINATION IS REQUIRED FOR WHICH SPECIES?

Dogs and Cats ONLY. More specifically, per *Code of Virginia* 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.

2. WHO IS LEGALLY AUTHORIZED TO ADMINISTER A RABIES VACCINE?

As per the *Code of Virginia* 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.

3. HOW LONG MUST A COPY OF THE SIGNED RABIES CERTIFICATE BE MAINTAINED BY THE PRACTICE AND WHAT INFORMATION MUST BE INCLUDED ON A RABIES CERTIFICATE?

The Virginia Board of Veterinary Medicine (BVM) oversees 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 instruct 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.

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.

4. WHAT ARE THE AGE REQUIREMENTS FOR RABIES VACCINATION IN Virginia?

Dogs and cats should be vaccinated for rabies by the time they are four months old. 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. Most rabies vaccines are label for 3 months as the youngest age for a primary vaccination. Thereafter, a dog or cat should be boosted as per the manufacturer's label instructions. There is no upper age limit beyond which rabies vaccination is not required by law.

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

For the purposes of rabies exposure response, dogs and cats are considered currently vaccinated 28 days following administration of the initial dose of rabies vaccine. This applies regardless of the animal's age at the time the initial dose is administered.

6. WHAT CRITERIA CONSTITUTES "CURRENTLY VACCINATED" AGAINST RABIES?

In Virginia, the term "currently vaccinated" is defined in the rabies regulations which can be found in the *Virginia Administrative Code*, specifically:

"Currently vaccinated" means the animal was (i) vaccinated by a licensed veterinarian or a licensed veterinary technician under the direct supervision of a licensed veterinarian on the premises and (ii) the animal was vaccinated and revaccinated in accordance with the current National Association of State Public Health Veterinarian's Compendium of Animal Rabies Prevention and Control or as described on the U.S. Department of Agriculture approved vaccine label. For the purposes of rabies exposure response and section [3.2-6522](#) of the *Code of Virginia*, an animal will not be considered currently vaccinated until it has been at least 28 days since the initial vaccination and then immediately after every subsequent vaccination.

7. IS THERE AN EXTENDED DURATION (beyond 3 years) RABIES VACCINE AVAILABLE TODAY? (see also Question #10)

NO.

USDA licensed rabies vaccines available for administration to animals residing with the US are only 1-Year or 3-Year labeled vaccines. 4-YEAR rabies vaccines have been discontinued and are no longer recognized in the US.

In Virginia, a veterinarian has the discretion to administer a 1-Year or 3-Year labeled rabies vaccine as THE INITIAL DOSE. All animal rabies vaccines currently licensed in the US require a booster one year after the initial vaccine. Thereafter, booster doses may need to be given either every year or every 3 years depending on the vaccine manufacturer's label.

RE-VACCINATION of DOGS and CATS: When administering booster rabies vaccine doses, the duration that a dog or cat is considered "currently vaccinated" is strictly determined by the product label of the last vaccine administered (ie, either 1 year or 3 years).

8. WHAT ARE THE RABIES VACCINATION REQUIREMENTS FOR A DOG/CAT IMPORTED 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 vdacs.virginia.gov/animals.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. When importing dogs from another country, a confinement period may be required until 30 days beyond the primary (initial) vaccination. 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>.

9. CAN A 3-YEAR LABELED RABIES VACCINE BE SUBSTITUTED FOR A 1-YEAR LABELED RABIES VACCINE WHEN ADMINISTERING THE INITIAL DOSE?

Veterinarians can use discretion when selecting a rabies vaccine for administration to a dog/cat (ie, either a 1-Year or 3-Year labeled rabies vaccine).

Regardless of the type of rabies vaccine (1-Year or 3-Year labeled vaccine) used when administering the initial dose, the second dose must be administered within one year. Beyond one year after the initial vaccination, the animal is no longer considered “currently vaccinated”.

10. WHAT ARE THE RE-VACCINATION REQUIREMENTS FOR A PET THAT IS OVERDUE FOR A REQUIRED RABIES BOOSTER? (4-Parts)

- **When is an animal considered to be “overdue” for a rabies booster?**

An animal is considered “overdue”, and NOT currently vaccinated, if just one day beyond the labeled duration of the vaccine administered (1 year or 3 years).

The exception to this rule is that an animal is considered “overdue” after just one year following the *initial rabies vaccine dose*, regardless of the vaccine labeling.

- **Following the re-vaccination of an “overdue” animal, when is the animal considered to be “currently vaccinated”?**

In Virginia, a dog or cat that is overdue for a rabies vaccine is considered currently vaccinated as soon as the animal is re-vaccinated.

This rule applies despite the time that has lapsed since administration of the previous dose of rabies vaccine.

- **When re-vaccinating the “overdue” patient, which vaccine must be used (1-Year or 3-Year labeled vaccine)?**

In Virginia, a licensed veterinarian has discretion in determining which vaccine to use (ie, either a 1-Year or 3-Year labeled rabies vaccine).

- **When is the NEXT dose due?**

The next dose is due based on the product label of the vaccine used (ie, either 1 year or 3 years later).

Note: There are no laws in Virginia that specifically address vaccinating animals overdue for a rabies vaccination. In general, the Virginia Department of Health recommends 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.

11. CAN A “POSITIVE” RABIES ANTIBODY TITER SUBSTITUTE FOR A REQUIRED BOOSTER DOSE?

No. In Virginia, a rabies antibody titer is NOT recognized as an index of immunity (or protection) in lieu of vaccination.

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.

Note: A “positive” rabies titer from a certified laboratory only means that the animal (*at the time of travel*) has been “adequately vaccinated” against rabies and meets the rabies vaccination requirement of that country/region at the time of importation. For a current list of importation requirements by country go to <https://www.aphis.usda.gov/aphis/pet-travel> or search using the phrase “APHIS Pet Travel”.

12. WHAT CONSTITUTES RABIES “EXPOSURE” IN A PET?

Rabies is transmitted when the virus is introduced into bite wounds or when wet saliva or central nervous system tissue (CNS) enters 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](#) 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.

13. WHO HAS THE AUTHORITY TO DETERMINE A PET HAS BEEN EXPOSED TO RABIES?

The health department, specifically the local health director, is recognized in the *Code of Virginia* as the authority at whose direction decisions are made about the disposition of animals exposed to rabies and the entity that assesses exposures. Issues pertaining to human or domestic animal rabies exposure should be directed to your local health department. A directory of Virginia's local health departments can be found at <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/local-health-districts/>. In some localities and/or outside of regular business hours, animal control may serve as the first point of contact for rabies related matters. For the purposes of rabies related matters, local animal control personnel are to report to and be directed by the local health director. (*Code of Virginia* section [3.2-6562.1](#)).

14. WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF RABIES "EXPOSURE" IN A PET THAT IS "CURRENTLY VACCINATED"? (see also FAQ #6 and #13)

Any currently vaccinated 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/>.

A veterinarian should evaluate the animal at the first signs of illness. If the signs are compatible with rabies, the animal should be humanely euthanized and tested for rabies, or if the animal dies, it should be tested for rabies.

15. WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF RABIES "EXPOSURE" IN A PET THAT IS NOT "CURRENTLY VACCINATED"? (see also FAQ #6 and #13)

- **Unvaccinated (ie, has NEVER been vaccinated against rabies):**

Any unvaccinated dog, cat, or ferret that may have been exposed to a proven or suspect rabid animal should be humanely euthanized unless the exposing animal tests negative for rabies.

Alternatively, if the owner of an exposed dog, cat, or ferret is unwilling to euthanize it, the dog, cat, or ferret should be placed in strict isolation.

As per section [3.2-6522](#) of the *Code of Virginia*, the exposed 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." However, based on recommendations published in the latest version of the *Compendium of Animal Rabies Prevention and Control*, local health departments may reduce the isolation time from 6 months to 4 months for dogs and cats.

Isolation time for an exposed ferret remains at 6 months.

A rabies vaccination is to be administered by a licensed veterinarian prior to release and the *Code of Virginia* section [3.2-6522](#) allows for the administration of rabies vaccine at the beginning of isolation.

A veterinarian should evaluate the animal at the first signs of illness. If the signs are compatible with rabies, the animal should be humanely euthanized and tested for rabies, or if the animal dies while in isolation, it should be tested for rabies.

- **Is OVERDUE for a booster, and has documentation of prior vaccination:**

The disposition of any dog, cat, or ferret with an expired vaccination that may have been exposed will be determined by the local health department (*Code of Virginia* section [3.2-6522](#)). Many animals with expired vaccinations may be handled as currently vaccinated unless the exposed animal is immunosuppressed. Animal healthcare personnel should report rabies exposure concerns to local health department or local animal control personnel.

- **Is OVERDUE for a booster, but DOES NOT HAVE documentation of vaccination:**

These animals may be treated as unvaccinated or, in consultation with the local health department, if an owner is interested in pursuing it, he may, at his own expense, chose to have his pet assessed via prospective serologic monitoring for rabies antibodies. In brief, this involves collecting serum on the day the rabies vaccine is administered and then collecting serum 5 days later. These serum samples are then submitted for paired antibody assessment. If there is a substantial increase in antibody level between the first as second serum samples and the second serum sample titer is above 0.5IU/mL, then local public health authorities will likely accept this as supporting evidence for prior vaccination and proceed as described in question #14.

16. DOES Virginia RECOGNIZE THE RESULTS OF PROSPECTIVE SEROLOGIC MONITORING (PSM) AS VALID DOCUMENTATION THAT A DOG/CAT HAS BEEN PREVIOUSLY VACCINATED AGAINST RABIES?

If owners of dogs or cats assessed as exposed to rabies for which no written documentation of previous vaccination can be produced, are interested in pursuing Prospective Serologic Monitoring, the Virginia Department of Health will incorporate the results as a consideration in post-exposure response decision making.

Prospective Serologic Monitoring (PSM) is a defined testing protocol specifically indicated for use in dogs & cats (ONLY) that have been determined (by public health or rabies control

authorities) to be “exposed” to rabies (See also FAQs #12 and #13 in this section) yet, the owner is unable to provide valid documentation of recent rabies vaccination.

The PSM testing protocol and submission requirements are strictly defined and must be adhered to. The PSM applies only to dogs and cats. The PSM testing protocol is available at http://www.nasphv.org/Documents/NASPHV_Serologic_Monitoring_2016.pdf

Note: Properly labelled, paired specimens are required. Samples should not be sent samples separately. Both serum samples should be received by the laboratory at the same time.

17. WHAT ACTION IS REQUIRED IF AN ANIMAL THAT IS CURRENTLY VACCINATED BITES A PERSON? (see also Question #6)

Regardless of vaccination status, any healthy dog, cat or ferret that bites a person should be confined for 10 days observation. If the animal was shedding rabies virus at the time of the bite, it will be symptomatic at the time or within a few days (and almost certainly within 10 days). The animal may be euthanized if it is requested by the owner and should then be tested for rabies.

Because a reaction to vaccination could be confused with early signs of rabies, rabies vaccinations for dogs, cats or ferrets during confinement are not recommended.

If signs of rabies develop during the confinement period, a veterinarian should evaluate the animal and determine if the signs are compatible with rabies. If they are, the animal should be humanely euthanized and tested for rabies as soon as possible.

If the animal dies during confinement, it should be tested for rabies as soon as possible.

If the animal that inflicted the bite injury is not available for observation or testing, the victim should receive a rabies exposure risk assessment and recommendation for rabies post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP).

18. WHAT ACTION IS REQUIRED IF AN ANIMAL THAT IS NOT CURRENTLY VACCINATED BITES A PERSON? (see also Question #6)

Regardless of vaccination status, any healthy dog, cat or ferret that bites a person should be confined for 10 days observation. If the animal was shedding rabies virus at the time of the bite, it will be symptomatic at the time or within a few days (and almost certainly within 10 days). The animal may be euthanized if it is requested by the owner and should then be tested for rabies.

Because a reaction to vaccination could be confused with early signs of rabies, rabies vaccinations for dogs, cats or ferrets during confinement are not recommended.

If signs of rabies develop during the confinement period, a veterinarian should evaluate the animal and determine if the signs are compatible with rabies. If they are, the animal should be humanely euthanized and tested for rabies as soon as possible.

If the animal dies during confinement, it should be tested for rabies as soon as possible.

If the animal that inflicted the bite injury is not available for observation or testing, the victim should receive a rabies exposure risk assessment and recommendation for PEP.

19. AS A LICENSED VETERINARIAN, DO YOU HAVE THE AUTHORITY TO EXEMPT AN ANIMAL FROM THE LEGAL REQUIREMENT TO BE VACCINATED AGAINST RABIES? (eg, for medical reasons)

The *Code of Virginia* section [3.2-6521](#), in part, provides 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.”

This exemption is designed to create a mechanism whereby owners could still obtain a county or city license without having to produce a current rabies certificate; however, it is important to keep in mind that for the purposes of rabies exposure response, an exempted animal will be considered unvaccinated. The entire text of Virginia’s rabies regulations, which offers detail about rabies exemptions, can be found at

<http://law.lis.virginia.gov/admincode/title12/agency5/chapter105>

A guidance document, which discusses the language of the law associated with exemptions and examples of certain conditions for which an exemption may be appropriate, has been developed to assist veterinarians with the process of rabies vaccine exemptions. A standard application form has also been developed for this process. This guidance document and the standardized application form can be found as part of the Rabies Regulations and Exemption section of the Virginia Department of Health’s Rabies Control website 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. A directory of local health departments can be found at <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/local-health-districts/>

Veterinarians are also encouraged to contact their local health departments to report exposures or if they have questions about any of the regulatory language.

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

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

21. IS RABIES VACCINATION OF A HYBRID or EXOTIC PET ALLOWED or RECOGNIZED?

Although the USDA has not labeled any vaccines for use in hybrid animals, licensed veterinarians practicing in Virginia may choose to vaccinate hybrids as an extra-label use of a biologic.

The American Veterinary Medical Association liability insurance program (AVMA-PLIT) recommends that the administering veterinarian 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. Specifically, the AVMA-PLIT position statement reads "Prior to any such vaccination, however, the owner should be informed that the vaccine is not approved for use in wolf hybrids and that there have been no studies to prove the efficacy of the vaccine in these animals. The veterinarian should make a notation of the discussion in the record and have the owner or owner's agent initial it."

Note: Section [3.2-6522](#) of the *Code of Virginia* states "When any animal, other than a dog or cat, is exposed or may have been exposed to rabies through a bite, or through saliva or central nervous system tissue, in a fresh open wound or mucous membrane, by an animal suspected to be rabid, decisions regarding the disposition of that newly exposed animal shall be at the discretion of a local health director."

The public health response, therefore, to any animal that is not a dog or a cat that may have been exposed to rabies is at the health director's discretion and may include euthanasia of an exposed hybrid animal if the exposing animal was unavailable for testing.

22. 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.

REFERENCES

- a. The *Virginia Guidelines for Rabies Prevention and Control* (with references 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. An index to rabies related aspects of the *Code of Virginia* can also be found at <https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/animal-contact-human-health/rabies-control/virginia-guidelines-for-rabies-prevention-and-control/>.
- 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/>.

e. A directory of Virginia's local health departments: <https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/local-health-districts/>

f. Vaccination of wolf hybrids: Position of the AVMA-PLIT available through members aspect of the AVMA site at https://www.avma.org/resources-tools/avma-policies/vaccination-wolf-hybrids-position-avma-plit?check_logged_in=1

Document last reviewed: 2/2/2023