

What You Should Know About Rabies

Rabies, In General

Rabies is caused by a virus which can infect all warm-blooded mammals, including man. The rabies virus is found in the saliva of a rabid animal and is transmitted by a bite, or possibly by contamination of an open cut.

Bats, raccoons, skunks, groundhogs, foxes, cats, and dogs represent about 95% of animals diagnosed with rabies in the United States. Domestic farm animals and other wild animals may also become infected. Rodents such as rats, mice, chipmunks, and squirrels are rarely infected.

Rabid animals are usually either very vicious and aggressive (“furious” rabies) or act stuporously and are partially or totally paralyzed (“dumb” rabies). They often have trouble walking and may appear to be “drunk”. People should stay away from all wild and stray animals which are aggressive or appear to be sick. Some wild animals, such as raccoons, skunks, and groundhogs, may be infectious even though they appear to be normal, and these animals should be avoided at all times.

How to Protect Yourself from Rabies

Have Your Pet Vaccinated Against Rabies. Pets can become infected with rabies through contact with rabid wild animals. Because of this, it is important that your dog or cat have up-to-date rabies vaccinations. Because a current trend in the United States indicates that there has been a higher incidence of rabies in cats than in dogs in recent years, rabies vaccination is especially important for cats. Cats left outdoors to roam have a greater chance of exposure to rabid animals, but even indoor cats should be vaccinated, as occasionally they may get out and/or wild animals, such as bats or raccoons, may get into houses through open doors, windows, or uncapped chimneys. You should get your pet vaccinated at a private veterinarian’s office or at a free state/municipal-sponsored rabies clinic, or call Bergen County Humane Enforcement at 201-621-4111 or check their website at www.bchenj.org.

Do Not Feed or Handle Wild Animals. Especially avoid contact with all bats, raccoons, skunks, groundhogs, and foxes. It is illegal in New Jersey to keep these wild animals as pets. Take measures to prevent raccoons or bats from entering homes, barns, garages, and other buildings. Store all trash or pet food kept outdoors in animal-resistant containers.

Avoid Contact With Strays or Pets Other Than Your Own. These animals may bite or scratch you and may not be vaccinated for rabies. Report stray animals to your local health department so that the animal control officer can take them to a shelter. Stray animals which are captured and impounded are held for at least seven days so they can be reclaimed by their owner.

What To Do If You Are Bitten

Immediately cleanse the wound thoroughly with soap and water.

Get prompt medical attention from a physician or hospital emergency room.

If you are bitten by a wild animal: Try to confine and isolate, or kill the animal while taking care to prevent additional bites and exposures. If captured, wild animals must be tested at the state rabies laboratory. Human treatment to prevent rabies may be started immediately or delayed until the testing results are known. In cases in which the animal is unavailable for testing, a decision to start human preventive treatment is made by the bite victim and his/her physician based on recommendations from the local health department.

If you are bitten by a dog or cat or other domestic animal: Obtain as much information about the animal as possible, including owner name, address, and telephone number, a description of the animal, and the animal's vaccination status. Biting dogs and cats should be kept under observation for 10 days from the time of the bite to ensure that they are free of rabies; if already showing signs of rabies at the time of the bite, they should be sacrificed immediately and tested for rabies. Dogs or cats which die or are euthanized within 10 days after biting a person must be submitted for rabies testing. Bites from other domestic animals (such as horses, cows, goats, and sheep) will be evaluated by your local health department; these animals can usually be observed for a period of 14 days to rule out the possibility of rabies.