Rabies
Fact Sheet

Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention
An Office of the Department of Health and Human Services
Paul R. LePage, Governor Mary C. Mayhew, Commissioner

What is rabies?
Rabies is a disease that affects the brain and spinal cord and is caused by a virus. It is almost always fatal. Rabies in people is rare in the United States. Rabies in animals – mainly wild animals – is common in Maine.

How is rabies spread?
The rabies virus can be found in the saliva, brain, and spinal cord of infected animals. Rabies is spread when infected animals bite or scratch another animal or person. The virus can also be spread if saliva or tissue from the brain or spinal cord gets into broken skin or the mouth, nose or eyes. These are called rabies exposures. Rabies is not spread by petting the fur of a rabid animal. It is not spread by blood, urine, feces, or by touching dried saliva of a rabid animal. It is also not spread by skunk spray.

How soon after an exposure will a person get sick?
It could take weeks to years for a person to show signs of rabies after being infected. Most people start showing signs of the disease within one to three months after a true exposure to a rabid animal, in the absence of treatment.

How soon after an exposure will an animal get sick?
It can take 2 weeks to 6 months for a domestic cat or dog to show signs of rabies after being infected. It is not known how long after infection a wild animal will get sick.

What are signs and symptoms of rabies?
Early signs of rabies in people may include fever or headache, but this changes quickly to nervous system signs, such as unclear thinking, sleepiness, or worry. Once someone with rabies starts showing signs, they usually die. This is why it is very important to talk to a healthcare provider right away if you are bitten by any animal, especially a wild animal.

Animals with rabies usually act strangely once the virus gets to their brain, but signs may vary. Some animals may seem shy and fearful while others become mean. Some rabid animals stumble as though drunk, seem lame, or seem very friendly. You cannot tell by looking at an animal if it has rabies, so avoid contact with all wild animals – especially bats, skunks, foxes, and raccoons – and any animal that you don't know.

Is there a test to tell if an animal has rabies?
The state public health laboratory in Augusta can test an animal's brain tissue to find out if it has rabies. However, rabies can be ruled out in domestic animals without testing through a 10 day confinement period.

Which animals can get rabies?
All mammals, or animals with fur that produce milk, can get rabies. Some animals are more likely to get rabies, including raccoons, skunks, foxes, and bats. Rabies is very rare among small rodents like squirrels, rats, mice, and chipmunks. Rabies is rare in vaccinated pets and farm animals. It is important to make sure that all pets and farm animals stay up to date with their rabies shots to keep them from getting rabies and spreading it to their owners and other animals.

What should you do if you or your pet were exposed?
If you or your pet had contact with a wild animal or animal that you don't know, follow the steps below to prevent rabies.

1. Wash the wound thoroughly with soap and water.
2. Call your healthcare provider. He/she will help you decide if you need to be treated for rabies. Maine CDC can help assess rabies exposures and recommend control measures.
3. Contact your town's Animal Control Officer (ACO) if the attacking animal is domestic, like a dog or cat. Reach the ACO by calling the town office or state police.
4. Contact your local Game Warden if the attacking animal is wild, like a raccoon or skunk. Reach the Game Warden by calling state police.
5. If your pet was bitten or scratched by an animal, call your veterinarian and the ACO or Game Warden.

What is the treatment for people exposed to rabies?

Treatment for people exposed to rabies is a combination of vaccine and immunoglobulin (RIG) shots. This is called "post-exposure prophylaxis," or PEP. The number and type of shots needed depends on a person's health status and whether he/she has been vaccinated for rabies in the past.

If the attacking animal was captured and can either be confined and observed or tested for rabies, your healthcare provider can usually wait for the outcome before deciding if treatment is needed. Rabies treatment is generally not needed for squirrel, mouse, or other small rodent bites.

If PEP is recommended:

- **An unvaccinated person** should get 4 doses of rabies vaccine – one dose right away, along with a dose of RIG, and 3 more doses of vaccine on the 3rd, 7th, and 14th days after the first shot is given.
- **A person who had pre-exposure vaccine or a complete regimen of PEP** should get 2 doses of rabies vaccine – one dose right away and one 3 days later; no RIG is needed.
- **A person who has a weakened immune system** should receive 5 doses of rabies vaccine – one dose right away, along with a dose of RIG, and 4 more doses of vaccine on the 3rd, 7th, 14th, and 28th days after the first shot is given.

How can you prevent rabies?

- Make sure your pets are vaccinated against rabies. By law, all dogs and cats must be vaccinated.
- Avoid contact with all wild animals and any animal that you do not know.
- Fasten trashcan lids tightly and do not leave pet food outside. This brings animals like skunks and raccoons close to your home.
- Talk to a trained exterminator or contractor about "bat-proofing" your home.
- Do not handle sick or hurt wild animals yourself; call your ACO or a wildlife rehabilitator.
- ACOs, veterinarians and their assistants, and others who have a lot of contact with stray animals or wildlife should think about getting the pre-exposure rabies vaccine.

Where can I get more information?

For more information, contact Maine CDC by calling 1-800-821-5821 or visiting the website http://www.mainepublichealth.gov/rabies. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website - http://www.cdc.gov/rabies – is another excellent source of health information.

Important Telephone Numbers

Maine CDC Disease Reporting and Consultation
(800) 821-5821 TTY: Maine Relay 711

Health and Environmental Testing Laboratory
(207) 287-2727

State Veterinarian
(207) 287-3701

State Police (Nights and Weekends)

Augusta	(800) 452-4664
Gray	(800) 482-0730
Houlton	(800) 924-2261
Orono	(800) 432-7381

Game Warden Service (Weekdays)

Ashland	(207) 435-3231
Bangor	(207) 941-4440
Gray	(207) 657-2345
Greenville	(207) 695-3756
Sidney	(207) 547-5300

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