



MAINE HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL TESTING LABORATORY
HETL
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

221 State St. Station #12 Augusta, Maine 04333 (207)-287-2727

RABIES

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

<http://www.state.me.us/dhs/etl/rabies/rabfct.htm>

What is RABIES?

Rabies is a viral disease of the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord) that is almost always fatal. Rabies in humans is very rare in the US, but rabies in animals, especially wildlife, is common in some parts of the country.

How is rabies spread?

The rabies virus lives in the saliva (spit), neural fluids and brain tissue of animals and is spread when they bite or scratch. The virus can also be spread if one of these fluids or tissue touches broken skin or mucous membrane (in the mouth, nose or eyes).

What kind of animals spread rabies?

The rabies virus can infect any mammal (if it has fur or hair, it's a mammal), but it only becomes common among certain mammals such as bats, skunks, foxes and raccoons. Rabies is very rare among rodents (squirrels, rats, mice and chipmunks). Thanks to vaccines, rabies is extremely rare among pets and farm animals.

How common is rabies in Maine?

In 2003 there were 82 clinically confirmed cases of rabid animals in Maine. 5 of these cases were in York County, 22 cases in Cumberland County, 6 cases in Oxford County, 19 cases in Androscoggin County, 19 cases in Kennebec County, 4 cases in Franklin County, 2 cases in Sagadahoc County, 1 case in Lincoln County, 1 case in Waldo County, 1 case in Penobscot County, and 2 cases in Hancock County.

The Health and Environmental Laboratory in Augusta tests potentially rabid animals that have had contact with either a human or domestic animal.

How can you tell if an animal is rabid?

Rabid animals usually behave abnormally, but signs vary. Some animals may appear shy and fearful, others become aggressive, and some may simply stumble as though drunk or appear lame.

Contact with all wild animals -- especially bats, skunks, foxes, and raccoons should be avoided.

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

If you have been bitten or scratched by a wild animal, or by a pet or farm animal that has been behaving oddly, follow these steps:

- 1. Wild animals must be captured or killed without injuring the brain since the brain tissue must be tested.*
- 2. Immediately wash the wound with soap and water, and continue washing for at least 10 minutes.*
- 3. Call your doctor or health care professional when you finish washing. They will help you decide if you need to be treated for rabies. Follow their instructions completely.*
- 4. Contact the Maine Bureau of Health; Health and Environmental Testing Laboratory (207) 287-2727 the Epidemiology program (207) 287-6582, or the 24 Hour Emergency Consultation 1-800-452-1999 for further instructions.*
- 5. If your pet has been bitten or scratched by an animal that you think might be rabid, follow the same steps and notify your veterinarian.*

The most dangerous type of exposure is a bite or scratch, from an infected animal, that has penetrated the intact skin of a susceptible animal or person.

A nonbite exposure occurs when scratches, wounds, or mucous membranes (eyes, nose, throat) are contaminated with saliva or brain tissue from an infected animal. Contact with dried saliva, blood, urine, or feces as well as petting does not constitute an exposure and would not require post exposure treatment.

While there may be circumstances in which a nonbite exposure may require post exposure treatment, nonbite exposures resulting in human rabies rarely occurs. The decision to treat must be decided between the patient and physician in all cases.

What is the treatment for people exposed to rabies?

People who have never had rabies immunizations are given a series of six injections one at a time over the course of a month. Rabies injection shots are not administered in the stomach muscles. The first injection is antibodies to fight the virus, and the rest of the injections are vaccine to ensure long lasting protection. To work best, the series of injections should begin as soon after the bite or scratch as possible. ***However, if the animal is captured and tested for rabies, your doctor may wait until the test results come back to determine if treatment is truly necessary.***

How can you prevent rabies?

- Be a responsible pet owner. ***Make sure your pets are neutered (fixed) and vaccinated against rabies.*** All dogs and cats, by law must be vaccinated against rabies. Cats especially need to be vaccinated because they are hunters by nature and often have contact with animals at high risk for rabies. By vaccinating household pets, we can establish a buffer between wildlife and humans.
- Avoid contact with wild animals, especially bats, skunks, foxes, and raccoons including baby animals. Avoid any animal -- wild, farm or domestic -- that behaves oddly, and report it to the local Animal Control Officer.
- Discourage wild animals from "sharing your lunch." Don't leave pet food or water outside. Fasten trashcan lids tightly. Garbage attracts animals.
- Teach your children to keep a safe distance from wild animals, strays, and all other animals that they don't know well. Enjoy all wild animals from a distance, even if they seem friendly! A rabid animal sometimes acts tame.
- Dogs and cats must not roam at large, but should be confined to the owner's property, preferably on a leash or better yet, within a fenced area. ***It is against the law to allow your dog or a dog in your care to roam.*** Confinement to the property will lessen the chances of them having contact with a rabid animal.
- If a pet has been in a fight with another animal, wear waterproof gloves while handling the pet. Consult your veterinarian.
- ***It is against the law to keep wild animals as pets.*** There are no approved rabies vaccines for wild animals including Hybrids (offspring of wild animals bred with domesticated cats or dogs).

- Bats found inside your home, alive or dead, should be tested for rabies--even if there was no known contact with the bat. Consult with a professional exterminator or contractor about "bat-proofing" your home.

- ***Do not handle sick or injured wild animals including baby animals.*** Call your Animal Control Officer or State Game Warden. If you must handle a dead animal, use heavy gloves, sticks or other tools to avoid direct contact with saliva, neural fluid, and brain tissue.

- If you are bitten or scratched by an unfamiliar animal, do not try to guess if it is rabid. Call your doctor and Animal Control Officer or warden service for advice.

- Animal Control Officers, trappers, veterinarians and their assistants, and others who have contact with strays or wildlife should consider preventative rabies vaccinations to protect themselves before they are exposed to the virus.

Facts about rabies:

- ➔ Clinical signs usually appear within 15 to 25 days after exposure. It may take as long as one year for the virus to travel to the brain.
- ➔ An animal that has eaten the carcass of an infected animal can spread rabies.
- ➔ In a frozen state, the rabies virus can last for years.
- ➔ Normally, the rabies virus cannot live in a warm putrefied environment and survives in the body less than 24 hours after death.
- ➔ Post exposure treatment for people exposed to a rabid animal can cost over \$2,000.00.

Incubation period:

Dogs- 2 weeks to 6 months (average is 3 to 8 weeks)

Cats- 2 weeks to 6 weeks

Humans- 2 weeks to up to 1 year (average is 2 to 23 weeks)

This period varies depending on the location of the bite wound or exposure. Once the virus reaches the central nervous system the spread is relatively rapid; 48 to 120 hours.

The incubation period in wild animals is unknown and extremely variable.

Management of dogs and cats that bite humans

Quarantine Period:

-Vaccinated or unvaccinated dogs and cats that bite a human must be quarantined for at least 10 days.

-Vaccinated dogs and cats that have been exposed to a rabid animal must be boosted with rabies vaccine and quarantined for 45 days.

-Unvaccinated dogs and cats that have been exposed to a rabid animal should be euthanized or must be vaccinated for rabies and quarantined for 6 months.

Important Telephone Numbers:

Human and animal exposure questions:

-Health and Environmental Testing Laboratory (207) 287-2727

Human exposure questions:

-Epidemiology Program (207) 287-6582

-24 Hour Emergency Consultation 1-800-452-1999

Warden Service (weekdays):

-Region A (Gray) (800) 295-2435

-Region B (Sidney) (800) 292-7436

-Region C (Bangor) (800) 624-2498

-Region D (Greenville) (800) 624-2538

-Region E (Ashland) (800) 624-2512

Animal Control Officer:

Call your town office or local police department to contact your local animal control officer.