

Rabies

What is it?

Rabies is a deadly disease caused by a virus that attacks the central nervous system, including the brain and spinal cord.

How is it spread?

Animal bites are the main source of infection. In rarer cases, the virus is passed on by scratches or infected blood or saliva that comes in contact with an open wound or membranes in the eyes, nose or mouth.

What kinds of animals catch it?

All mammals can get rabies. In Illinois, it's most common in striped skunks and bats. Unvaccinated dogs and cats are another high risk group.

What happens to sick animals?

Nearly all animals (including man) die once the virus takes hold in their nervous system. People who are exposed to rabies can get shots to keep the virus from spreading, but treatments must start soon to be effective.

What are the signs?

An animal's behavior can change when it gets sick. Lab tests are needed to make a positive diagnosis, but you should be cautious of any animal that:

- loses its fear of people - it can be very aggressive or very tame
- is out during the day when its normal routine is at night
- staggers, falls or stumbles
- has recent wounds from fighting
- has a hard time eating, drinking or swallowing - some animals drool or "foam at the mouth" because they can't swallow their saliva

Can the same signs show up in animals with other diseases?

Yes. Canine distemper is more common than rabies and can cause some of the same signs, especially in raccoons and gray foxes. While canine distemper doesn't affect humans, you should avoid contact with any sick animal. Treat every animal bite as a risk for rabies. Your life depends on it.

Some References

Zoonoses and Communicable Diseases Common to Man and Animals (second edition) by P.N. Acha and B. Szyfres. Pan American Health Organization, Washington, D.C. 1987. ISBN 92 75 11503 6.

Field Manual of Wildlife Diseases in the Southeastern United States (second edition) by W.R. Davidson and V.F. Nettles. Southeastern Cooperative Wildlife Disease Study, Athens, GA. 1997

Some contacts

● the Illinois Department of Natural Resources monitors wildlife populations and licenses people who remove wild animals that are sick or causing a nuisance (217/782-6384; <http://dnr.state.il.us>)

● the Illinois Department of Agriculture oversees rabies tag licensing, animal welfare and domestic animal control (217/782-6657; <http://www.agr.state.il.us>)

● the Illinois Department of Public Health monitors infectious diseases like rabies and can provide technical advice if someone is bitten by an animal (217/782-2016; <http://www.isph.state.il.us>)

What should I do if:

I want to avoid problems?

- Vaccinate your pets - both dogs and cats
- Don't touch or adopt wild animals
- Call your local animal control agency when stray pets show up at your home
- Teach kids to leave wildlife alone and tell you if they're bitten or scratched by an animal
- Keep pets inside your home or in a kennel when you're not around
- Don't feed wild animals or attract them by leaving food where they can get it
- Pre-exposure vaccines are available for high-risk groups like animal control officers and wildlife rehabilitators

I see a sick animal near my home?

- Stay away from the animal
- Keep your children away from it
- Bring your pets indoors
- Wait for the animal to leave or call the Department of Natural Resources for a list of people who are licensed to remove sick & nuisance animals for a fee

My pet is bitten?

- Confine or kill the wild animal that bit your pet, but only if you can do so without any risk to yourself.
- Call your veterinarian. Vaccinated pets will need a booster shot within five days. Unvaccinated pets must be quarantined or destroyed.

Tips for handling wild animals that are killed for rabies testing

- ✓ Wear rubber or latex gloves and a face mask
- ✓ Don't damage the brain - it's needed for tests
- ✓ Double wrap the animal in plastic garbage bags and keep it cool but do not freeze the animal
- ✓ Wash with soap and water; clean the area and any tools with 1 part bleach to 10 parts water
- ✓ Only animals that bite someone are tested

A person is bitten?

- Immediately wash the bite with lots of soap and water
- Go to your family doctor or the nearest emergency room without delay - options for effective treatment dwindle with time

Proper treatment will depend on the risk of getting rabies. Information about the animal will help determine that risk.

If it was a pet and you know its owners...

Find out if the pet has a current rabies vaccination. Write down the rabies tag number and the names and phone numbers of the pet's owner and veterinarian.

If it was a pet and you don't know its owners...

Note its breed, color and markings, if it had a collar, if you noticed any tags on its collar, whether the animal has been seen in the area before and what direction it was headed. Call your local animal control agency to help locate and catch the animal.

If it was a wild animal...

Confine or kill the animal that bit you, but only if you can do so without further risk. Do not damage the head or store the animal in a freezer. Call your local animal control agency if you need assistance.

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