

Kent County Health Department Rabies Fact Sheet



What is rabies?

Rabies is an infection caused by a virus. It is a disease of both people and animals. The virus attacks the brain and nerves. It is fatal if not treated before symptoms develop.

What are the symptoms?

Rabies in animals causes paralysis and changes in behavior. Animals may become very hostile or unusually friendly. Muscles of the throat and jaw may become paralyzed and cause drooling. Seizures are common.

In humans, the virus causes:

- Fever
- Headaches
- Unusual tingling sensations
- Confusion
- Tightening of the throat muscles
- Hydrophobia (fear of water)
- Seizures

The disease will quickly progress to paralysis, coma and death.

How is rabies spread?

The rabies virus is found in the saliva of an infected animal. It is spread when the animal bites another animal or person. Although rare, it is also possible to get the virus if infected saliva enters the body through open cuts or wounds, or through the eyes, nose or mouth. The incubation period (the time from exposure to the first symptoms) of rabies can vary from a few weeks to several months. Rabies is not found in blood, urine or feces.

How is rabies treated?

There is no known effective treatment for rabies once symptoms start. Rabies can be prevented if rabies immunoglobulin and vaccine are given soon after exposure to the virus.

The decision to begin rabies post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) should be made carefully, based on actual risk. PEP should be given by a health care provider as soon as possible after a high-risk exposure. **The Health Department does not give rabies shots.**

PEP starts with immune globulin and a rabies vaccine shot. It is followed by four more shots given over 28 days. As with any vaccination, the risk of an adverse reaction exists. PEP can cost *thousands* of dollars per person so avoid exposure to rabies before it happens.

Which animals carry rabies?

Five kinds of wild animals are the main carriers of rabies in the United States – raccoons, skunks, bats, foxes, and coyotes. **The most frequently found rabid animal in Michigan is the bat.** Although people usually know when a bat has bitten them, bats have small teeth. The bite may not leave a mark on the skin, bleed or even hurt. For that reason, if you find a bat in the room of:

- A sleeping person
- An unattended child
- Someone mentally or physically challenged
- An intoxicated person

you should seek medical attention immediately and capture the bat for testing. See Center for Disease Control and Prevention website: “To capture a bat”. The bat may be brought to the Animal Shelter and it will be sent to the State Lab for testing. **Testing the bat may help you avoid costly and unnecessary shots!!**

What should I do if I’m exposed to an animal that may have rabies?

- Thoroughly flush the wound with soap and water right away.

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- See your family doctor or visit a hospital emergency department as soon as possible. Each possible rabies exposure should be evaluated by a health care provider.
- If the animal is a pet, get the owner's name, address and phone number, and obtain proof the animal has a current rabies shot.
- If the animal is wild or a stray, look to see if there are any features that will allow you to identify it later on. Try to trap it if you can do so safely. If the animal must be killed, try not to damage the head.
- Surrendered or stray dogs, cats, and ferrets that have bitten a person and broken skin are observed for 10 days for signs of the rabies virus. If signs develop, the animal will be put to sleep before the end of the 10 days in order to have the animal tested for rabies.
- Some species of wild animals that have bitten a person and broken skin are put to sleep and tested as soon as possible.
- Cover garbage cans tightly and do not leave pet food outside. This may attract wild and stray animals.
- Wear gloves when handling animals. If they have bitten another animal or person, keep them confined to an area. Call your veterinarian for animal care, call your family doctor or visit a hospital emergency department as soon as possible, and call Animal Control to report the animal bite.
- Keep bats out of your home. Fall and winter are the best times to "bat-proof" your house. Any openings larger than a quarter-inch by half-inch should be caulked. Common bat entry points include down the chimney, through vents, and under siding, eaves or loose shingles. For more information on "bat-proofing" your house, contact a pest control company or a wildlife conservation agency.

How can I prevent being exposed to rabies?

- Do not pick up or touch bats – or any wild animal. In defense, most animals will bite. If a bat or wild animal lets you approach or handle it, the animal is probably sick.
- Keeping pets vaccinated protects them from exposures to rabies, including exposures you may not be aware of, such as a cat catching a bat.
- Do not leave pets outside or allow them to roam free.

The following animals are not considered likely to carry rabies:

- Chipmunk
- Squirrel
- Gerbil
- Hamster
- Guinea Pig
- Gopher
- Woodchuck
- Mole
- Mouse
- Rat
- Muskrat
- Prairie Dog
- Rabbit

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for talking with a health care provider. If you have any questions about rabies or think you may have it, call your health care provider.

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700 Fuller Ave NE
Grand Rapids, Michigan 49503
616-632-7100
www.accesskent.com