

Rabies

What is Rabies? Rabies is a fatal disease caused by a virus that attacks the central nervous system of warm-blooded animals. All mammals can get rabies, including pets, livestock, and man. Most commonly affected animals are raccoons, skunks, foxes, woodchucks, coyotes, bats, and the domestic cat.

The rabies virus travels slowly via the nervous system until it reaches the brain. In most species, the time from infection to onset of symptoms is two to twelve weeks, but some animals and people have been known to carry the virus for up to a year. Once the virus reaches the brain and symptoms appear, the animal dies within 10 to 14 days. This is also the time that the virus reaches the saliva and can infect others through a bite. The virus is only transmittable during the last stage of the disease and symptoms usually follow within ten to fourteen days. The last stage is always fatal.

Rabies is most commonly contracted through a bite wound from an infected animal in the last stage of the disease, but can also be transmitted when the saliva or brain tissue of an infected animal comes in contact with an open cut or mucous membranes such as the eyes.

Symptoms in wild animals can vary greatly and should not be used to judge whether an animal is rabid or not. Some common symptoms are changes in normal behavior, unnatural friendliness or aggression, foaming at the mouth, blindness, paralysis. Some animals have merely died with no previous symptoms.

To protect yourself and the public, extra precautions must be taken with RVS, Rabies Vector Species (raccoons, skunks, foxes, woodchucks, coyotes, bats). Even if rabies is not suspected, the person who found the animal and any bystanders must be questioned carefully. You need to be absolutely sure that no one has a possible exposure to the rabies virus through a bite, scratch, or from saliva contacting broken skin. It is imperative that you get everyone's contact information, addresses, and phone number, so that they can be questioned again if the animal should prove rabid.

If someone has had a possible exposure, instruct that person to seek medical advice from their doctor. Do not give medical advice yourself. Contact the wildlife rehabilitator for further instruction such as transporting the animal to the rehab center. The rehabilitator will contact the Department of Health and take the steps necessary to have the animal tested for rabies.

You also need to ask if any pets were exposed to the animal. If a pet dog or cat was exposed, instruct the owner to seek veterinary advice.

How you handle RVS will affect your own health and the survival of the animal you are trying to save. If you are bitten or scratched, the animal must be destroyed and tested. Using one of the "no touch" methods such as the box over method or netting, minimizes your chance of exposure, ensuring your health and the life of the animal.

What to do if you think you have been infected?

1. Take the situation seriously but do not panic. Treatment is successful if started early.
2. Capture and if able, kill the suspected animal without destroying the head or brain.
3. Thoroughly scrub the wound with soap and water and apply iodine or alcohol.
4. Contact your physician about wound treatment.
5. Contact your rehabilitator, local health department, or state game commission to obtain information on how to get the animal tested for rabies.

Your Rehabilitator