

Frequently Asked Questions about Rabies

What is rabies?

Rabies is a deadly disease. It is caused by a virus that attacks the nervous system of mammals and causes death after a short illness. Pets, livestock, wildlife, and people are all at risk.

Who can get rabies?

Any mammal can get rabies, including humans, dogs, cats, cows, and horses. In North Carolina, the wildlife most commonly infected with rabies virus are raccoons, bats, skunks, bobcats, red & gray foxes, coyotes, beavers, and groundhogs (woodchucks).

How is rabies spread?

An animal or human can be infected with rabies when saliva or nervous tissue from an infected animal enters open wounds, usually through a bite, or mucous membranes (the thin moist tissue that lines the eyes, nose or mouth etc.)

Stray dogs or puppies, cats or kittens, and ferrets may be infected with the rabies virus through contact with wild animals.

What if my animal is bitten or attacked by another animal?

Contact Animal Control (704) 920-3000. A rabies booster is required within 5 days of a bite to protect your currently vaccinated pet. Livestock producers should contact the NC Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

Why can a healthy domestic dog, cat, or ferret be held for ten days?

Studies have shown that dogs, cats, and ferrets only shed the rabies virus in their saliva for a short period of time (usually 4 to 5 days) before they develop symptoms. If the animal has not developed symptoms by the tenth day after the exposure then the animal would not have been shedding the virus at the time of the exposure.

What are the symptoms of rabies in people?

After an average of 30—50 days from exposure to a rabid animal, a person develops an illness that may include fever, sore throat, stiff muscles, headache, tiredness, restlessness, nausea, and itching or tingling at the site of the bite. As the disease progresses, a person may become agitated, with periods of calm. Fear of water caused by severe throat spasms when trying to drink may occur. Paralysis then starts in the legs and moves towards the head. Most people die from cardiac arrest or respiratory failure within a short period after onset of illness.

What are symptoms of rabies in animals?

Avoid any animal (wild or domestic) that is showing unusual behavior and report it to Animal Control immediately (704) 920-3000. The animal may be shy or hide; unusually approachable: slow depressed and confused. Or the animal may show erratic behavior: excitable, irritable, or aggressive, or confused and calm and suddenly attack when approached. Other signs are daytime activity in animals normally active at night, a change in the sound of the animal's voice, staggering, weakness or paralysis, inability to eat or drink, fear of water, drooling, convulsions, and frothing at the mouth. Ultimately rabies ends in paralysis, coma, and death.

How long is the rabies virus infectious after it is outside of the rabid animal?

Only until the saliva dries. The virus is easily killed by soaps, detergents, bleach, alcohol and ultraviolet light.

What will happen to the animal after a person has been bitten or otherwise exposed?

- If the animal is a healthy domestic dog, cat or ferret it should be confined and held for observation for 10 days. A licensed veterinarian must examine the animal at the beginning and end of the 10-day observation period. If the animal develops symptoms suggestive of rabies, it should be humanely destroyed and the brain sent for testing. If the animal is healthy at the end of the 10-day period, then no rabies exposure occurred and the person bitten will not need rabies vaccination.
- If the animal is not a domestic dog, cat or ferret, it should be captured, humanely destroyed and the brain sent for rabies testing. If the animal is a domesticated farm animal (cow, horse, etc.), an N.C. Department of Public Health veterinarian is consulted.
- Other biting animals that might have exposed a person to rabies should be reported immediately to local Animal Control. Management of animals other than dogs, cats, and ferrets depends on the species, the circumstances of the bite, the epidemiology of rabies in the area, the biting animal's history, current health status, and the animal's potential for exposure to rabies.



Know What to Do if You are Exposed to Rabies

ACT QUICKLY AND FOLLOW THESE STEPS

If you have been bitten, scratched, or had contact with the saliva or the brain/nervous tissue from any mammal (including pets, livestock, wildlife, and stray animals), you may have been exposed to rabies. Rabies is a deadly disease if not quickly treated by a doctor. Follow these important steps if you think you are exposed:

1. **Wash all wounds and exposed areas** thoroughly with soap and warm running water for 15 minutes. Gather information about the animal (species, behavior, circumstances of the bite, etc.)
2. **For wild animals and stray dogs or cats, call Animal Control (704) 920-3000** at once for safe capture. Only confine the animal if this can be done safely. If it is necessary to kill the animal, do not damage the head. An intact brain is needed for rabies testing.
3. **For pets call Animal Control.** Write down the owner's name and address. Ask for proof of current rabies vaccination. A dog, cat, or ferret that bites a person has to be captured, confined, and observed for 10 days.
4. **Call a Cabarrus Health Alliance communicable disease nurse (704) 920-1372** to discuss the details of your possible exposure. They will determine if you need treatment like rabies post-exposure prophylaxis. If you need treatment, you will be referred to the local hospital emergency care center.
5. If you are not referred for treatment, **contact or visit a healthcare provider** to assess the need for wound care, a tetanus shot, or antibiotics.

For more information visit these websites:

N.C. Division of Public Health: Rabies

<http://epi.publichealth.nc.gov/cd/diseases/rabies.html>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Rabies

www.cdc.gov/rabies

When is it too late to start rabies vaccinations after an exposure?

It's important to remember that rabies is a medical urgency but not an emergency. Decisions should not be delayed.

Ideally, the vaccination series should begin as soon as possible after an exposure has occurred and a health care provider has determined rabies vaccination is necessary. Usually you can wait for test results from a healthy domestic animal to see if rabies shots are needed. Bites and verified exposures from wild animals should be treated as if the animal were rabid until rabies has been ruled out.

Once a person develops rabies symptoms it is too late for treatment!

What is rabies PEP like? How many doses of vaccine will I need?

- Current rabies vaccines are relatively painless and administered in the arm like a flu vaccine. If, like most people, you have never received a rabies vaccine regimen before, you will require four (4) doses of rabies vaccine over a 14-day time frame (Days 0, 3, 7 and 14). The day you begin the schedule is Day 0 and includes human rabies immune globulin (RIG) as well as the first dose of rabies vaccine. Rabies immunoglobulin provides immediate protection against rabies until your body has responded to the vaccine and makes its own antibodies to rabies.
- If you are immune-compromised as determined by your healthcare provider, your schedule will include a 5th dose of rabies vaccine on Day 28, and you will also be required to have blood drawn for a rabies titer (test) on Day 28 to ensure that your immune system has responded appropriately to the rabies vaccines.
- If you have previously completed a pre- or post-exposure rabies regimen as determined by your healthcare provider, you will only require two (2) booster doses of rabies vaccine on Day 0 and Day 3. Rabies immunoglobulin should NOT be given.

What are the side effects of the vaccine?

As with most vaccines the most common side effect is soreness and redness at the site of the injection. More severe reactions are rare and often related to allergies to the ingredients in the vaccine. Contact your health care provider if you are having any health effects which you think might be related to the vaccine.

How will I pay for rabies PEP?

If you do not have insurance, do not qualify for Medicaid and your family income is less than the federal poverty level, you may qualify for the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services Indigent Program. Your LHD CD nurse will help you apply for this assistance. Some manufacturers of rabies vaccine also offer patient assistance programs for people who are underinsured or do not have health insurance (www.cdc.gov/rabies/medical_care/programs.html).

