

Introduction

Rabies is a deadly animal disease caused by a virus. People can get rabies from the bite of an infected animal. Each year, more than 55,000 people die from rabies worldwide.

Once the symptoms of rabies begin, the disease is usually fatal. However, a series of shots can prevent rabies in people exposed to the virus. Get medical care right away if you have been bitten by an animal.



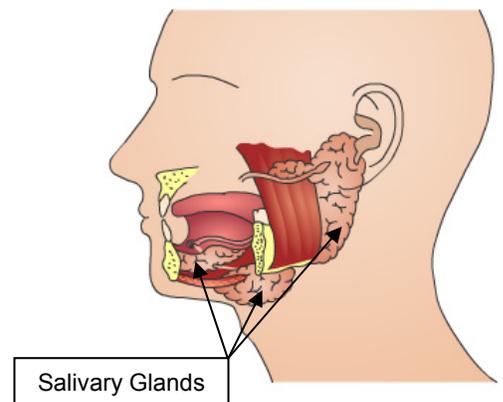
This reference summary covers rabies, including its symptoms and causes. It also discusses the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of rabies.

The Rabies Virus

Rabies is caused by a virus that is spread through the saliva of an infected animal. Once an animal or person is infected with rabies, the virus moves to the brain through the nerves in the body.

Before the virus reaches the brain, the animal or person does not appear ill. It may take weeks or months after exposure to the virus for symptoms to appear. After the virus reaches the brain, it multiplies and causes inflammation. This damages the brain and results in the late symptoms of rabies, such as anxiety, hallucinations, and paralysis.

The virus then moves from the brain to the salivary glands. The salivary glands are located in the head, neck, and throat. These glands make saliva.



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The rabies virus gets into the saliva of an infected animal so it can spread to another animal or to a person. Sometimes the virus moves into the saliva before the symptoms of rabies appear. This means that you may be exposed to the rabies virus even if the animal that bit you does not appear ill. The virus often causes death within 7 to 10 days after symptoms start.

Symptoms

There are often no early symptoms of rabies in humans. Symptoms often appear late in the disease. Once symptoms appear, rabies usually leads to death.

The first symptoms of rabies are similar to those of other illnesses:

- Fever
- General weakness or discomfort
- Headache



Late symptoms of rabies include:

- Abnormal behavior
- Agitation
- Anxiety
- Confusion
- Difficulty swallowing
- Hallucinations
- Increase in saliva
- Insomnia
- Slight or partial paralysis



Rabies may also cause a fear of water, known as hydrophobia. A person with rabies may be so afraid of water that they cannot drink or be near liquid of any kind.

Death usually happens within a few days after the late symptoms appear. However, rabies can be prevented. If you have been bitten by an animal, first wash the wound thoroughly with soap and water. Then seek medical attention to see if you need treatment.

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Causes

Rabies is caused by a virus in animals. It can be found in wild animals, such as raccoons, skunks, bats, and foxes. It can also affect dogs, cats, or farm animals.

The virus that causes rabies is spread through saliva. People most commonly get rabies from the bite of an infected animal. An animal infected with rabies is known as a rabid animal.

Wild animals usually avoid people. But they might attack if they feel threatened, are protecting their young or territory, or if they are sick. Be cautious of wild animals that do not run away when they see you. This may be a sign of a rabid animal.

Attacks by pets may also happen. Vaccinating your pets against rabies can prevent its spread.

Rarely, rabies can also spread if the saliva of an infected animal comes into contact with a cut or open wound. A person may also get rabies if the infected saliva comes into contact with moist skin surfaces called mucous membranes, such as the inside of the mouth or nose. This is also rare.

Humans infected with rabies cannot infect other humans. In very rare cases, the rabies virus may be acquired through an organ transplant with an infected organ.

In the United States, raccoons are the most common carriers of rabies. However, bats are more likely than raccoons to infect humans. Outside the United States, humans are most often infected by rabid dog bites.

Diagnosis

At the time of an animal bite, there is no way to know if the animal is infected or if it has passed the rabies virus to you. This is why it is important to seek medical care.

Your healthcare provider will examine the bite and ask about how you were bitten. He or she will ask about the type of animal that bit you. If your healthcare provider thinks you may have been exposed to the rabies virus, you will be treated.



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You can also help in the diagnosis of a possible rabies infection. If the animal was not wild and you know its owner, you can contact the owner to find out if the animal has been vaccinated against rabies. You can also call the local animal control to help find the animal. If the animal is found, it can be isolated and watched to see if the symptoms of rabies develop.

Even if it is unlikely that the animal that bit you was rabid, it is still important to seek medical care. Animal bites can easily become infected.



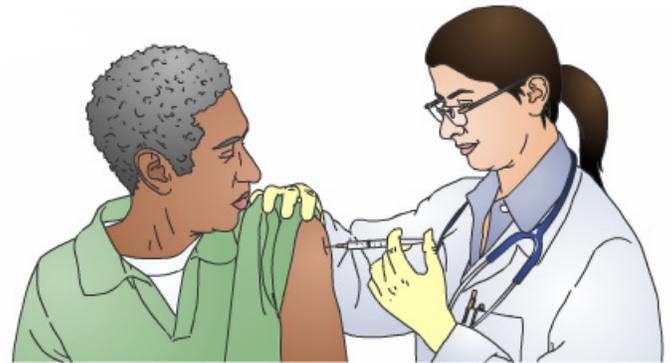
Treatment

There is no treatment for a rabies infection once symptoms have begun showing. A very small number of people have survived the disease, but it almost always causes death. If you may have been exposed to rabies, a series of shots can prevent the infection.

Rabies shots include:

- Rabies immune globulin
- Rabies vaccines

The rabies immune globulin is a fast-acting shot. It prevents the rabies virus from causing an infection and is given as soon as possible after the animal bite happens. Part of this shot must be injected around the bite.



The rabies vaccines help your body fight the rabies virus. Rabies vaccines are 4 shots given in the arm over a 2 week period. Your healthcare provider will also thoroughly clean the wound caused by the animal bite. This will greatly reduce the risk of infection.

If you are not up to date on your tetanus immunizations, you will receive a tetanus shot. A tetanus shot is needed every 10 years to prevent a serious illness caused by tetanus bacteria.

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Prevention

You can help prevent the spread of rabies and reduce the chance that your family will be infected with the virus. This section covers tips on preventing rabies.

Vaccinate your pets. This is the most important step you can take in preventing the spread of rabies. Dogs, cats, ferrets, and other household pets can be infected with rabies. Farm animals such as cows and horses can also be infected. Vaccinating these animals also protects you and your family from being exposed.



Rabies Vaccination

Don't let your pets roam outside. Allowing them to roam only puts your animals in danger of being attacked and exposed to rabies. This also puts you and your family at risk. Keep your pets inside or supervise them when they are outside.

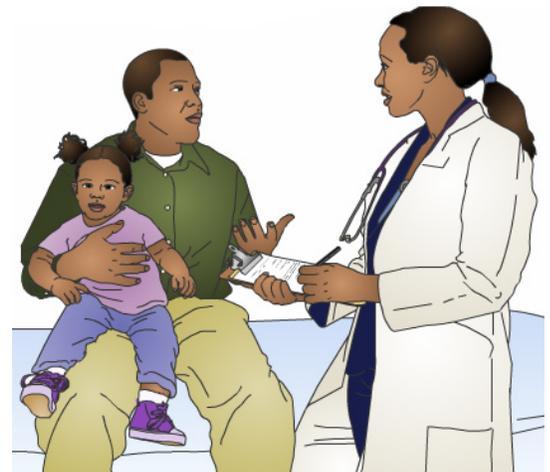
Don't approach any stray animals. Report strays to your local animal control. You can't tell if an animal has rabies just by looking at it. However, animals with rabies might be aggressive and vicious.

Make sure any gaps or spaces in your house are filled to prevent bats from getting inside. Bats commonly carry the rabies virus.

You can also prevent rabies by being cautious. If you suspect exposure to rabies, contact your healthcare provider. For example, you may wake up and find a bat in your room. Assume you have been bitten and seek medical care instead of waiting.

Young children may not be able to tell you if they have been bitten. If they have been around stray or wild animals, assume they have been bitten and seek medical care.

Also contact your healthcare provider if you are planning on traveling outside the country. Ask about receiving the rabies vaccine if you are traveling to a place where the virus is common.



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Summary

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The virus that causes rabies is spread through saliva. People most commonly get rabies from the bite of an infected animal. Each year, more than 55,000 people die from rabies worldwide.

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