

# Rabies

**R**abies is usually thought of as a disease that can occur in people who are bitten by dogs.

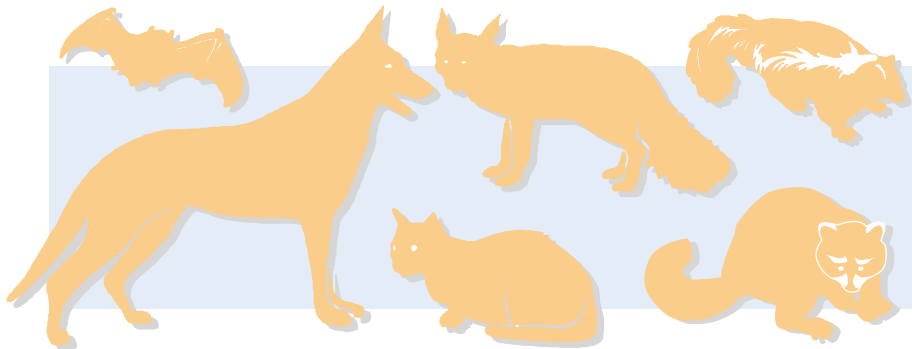
However, in the United States, since most domesticated animals (pets and livestock) are vaccinated for rabies, it is more likely that you will come into contact with rabies from a wild animal rather than from contact with a domesticated animal.

Any warm-blooded animal can carry the virus that causes rabies. You should always be careful around any animal you don't know. If you are bitten by any animal, domestic or wild, or if you come into contact with their saliva (even from a dead animal) seek medical help immediately. Rabies is deadly if you do not get treatment in time.

The August 23/30, 2000, issue of *JAMA* includes an article that discusses the appropriate use of anti-rabies treatment in emergency departments after possible exposure to rabies.

## WHAT IS THE TREATMENT AFTER EXPOSURE TO RABIES?

Anti-rabies treatment should begin as soon as possible, ideally within 24 to 48 hours after possible exposure to rabies. If there is a risk that someone has been exposed to rabies, immunization with ready-made antibodies against the rabies virus will be given. The immunization is supplied by a series of injections given over several weeks. In the United States, the shots are now given in the upper arm, instead of into the abdomen.



## WHAT IS RABIES?

Rabies is a disease caused by a virus. The virus is usually found in the saliva of the infected animal. The virus infects the central nervous system and eventually the brain. Without treatment a rabies infection almost always causes death.

## EXPOSURE TO RABIES:

- Wash with soap and water the wound from a bite or any area of broken skin that has come into contact with saliva from an animal that might have rabies
- Contact a doctor or seek emergency medical care right away; treatment should begin as soon as possible after exposure to rabies

*Also contact a doctor or seek emergency care right away if you wake to find a bat in your room, tent, or cabin.*

## WHAT ANIMALS CAN CARRY RABIES?

Any warm-blooded animal can carry the virus that causes rabies, but some are more likely than others to carry and transmit the disease. Observation or testing of the animal can help determine if it has rabies.

- Bats
- Cats
- Cattle
- Coyotes
- Dogs
- Foxes
- Skunks
- Raccoons

Rabies is found rarely in rabbits, mice, squirrels, rats, and opossums, but consult your physician if you come into contact with any wild animal's saliva.

There is also a vaccine for humans against rabies. People at high risk of coming in contact with animals with rabies should be vaccinated.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
or [www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/rabies](http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/rabies)  
888/CDC-FACTS
- National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID)  
Send postcard to:  
*Rabies*  
NIAID Office of Communications  
31 Center Drive, MSC 2520  
Bethesda, MD 20892-2520 or  
[www.niaid.nih.gov/factsheets/rabies.htm](http://www.niaid.nih.gov/factsheets/rabies.htm)

## INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous *JAMA* Patient Pages, check out the AMA's Web site at [www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm](http://www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm).

*Additional Sources:* Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, *The AMA Encyclopedia of Medicine*

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