

Rabies

This fact sheet provides basic information only. It must not take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always talk to a healthcare professional about any health concerns you have, and before you make any changes to your diet, lifestyle or treatment.

What is rabies?

Rabies is a very serious and life-threatening disease caused by the rabies virus, which infects the brain and nervous system. Any mammal can carry the rabies virus. In Canada the rabies virus is found in wild animals such as bats, raccoons, skunks, foxes and coyotes. In some developing countries, dogs and other animals often carry rabies. As bats have tiny sharp teeth, bite or scratch marks can go unnoticed. For this reason, if you have contact with a bat or if you are unsure if you have been bitten, scratched or licked, you should get advice right away to decide whether you need rabies prevention treatment.

Have you been exposed to rabies?

If you are bitten or scratched by an animal that seems to be sick, behaves strangely, and may have rabies, you should:

1. Wash the wound well with soap and warm water for at least five minutes. Then flush thoroughly with water. This greatly reduces the chance of infection.
2. Seek medical care from your doctor or local health centre right away.

It is crucial to begin prevention treatment for possible rabies as soon as possible. It typically takes from three to eight weeks before rabies symptoms start. If you wait until the symptoms begin to appear, it is usually too late to start effective medical treatment. If there is *any* chance that you may have been exposed to the rabies virus, contact your local health centre or family doctor so they can determine your risk. Yukon's Medical Officer of Health is available to your health care provider for assistance in determining this risk.

What are the symptoms of rabies in animals?

Animals with rabies often act very strangely. Some animals may become aggressive. Wild animals often show a lack of fear of humans, and they may attack humans for no reason.

Symptoms of rabies in animals include paralysis, especially of the hind limbs and throat muscles. Rabid bats may appear normal except for a gradual weakness and loss of flying ability. Also, rabid bats may come out in the daytime, which is unusual bat behaviour.

What is the treatment for rabies exposure?

Prevention treatment is only successful if started before symptoms appear. It involves getting both rabies vaccine and rabies immune globulin. (Administration of rabies vaccine and rabies immune globulin is usually organized by the Medical Officer of Health or designate.)

Rabies Vaccine:

- If you have never received rabies vaccine before, you will get five doses or shots in the upper arm, over a 28-day period. The vaccine makes your immune system

- produce antibodies against the rabies virus. Antibodies are proteins that help to fight infection.
- If you have received a full series of rabies vaccine in the past, you will get two shots of rabies vaccine over a three-day period. These will boost your antibodies against rabies.

Rabies Immune Globulin:

- Rabies Immune Globulin (RIG) has rabies antibodies taken from donated human blood. It is usually given at the same time as the first dose of rabies vaccine. RIG is given by needle into the area(s) of the bite or scratch, and in a different place on your body than the vaccine.

Possible Reactions after Treatment

Common reactions to the vaccine may include soreness, redness, swelling and itching where the shot was given. Fever, nausea, headache, muscle aches, fatigue and dizziness may also occur.

Common reactions to RIG may include soreness or stiffness where the shot was given. Fever, headache, feeling unwell, rash, or chills may also occur.

Report serious or unexpected reactions to your public health nurse or doctor.

Who should not get the rabies vaccine and immune globulin?

Anyone thought to have been exposed to the rabies virus will receive the vaccine and immune globulin. Speak with a community health nurse or doctor if you have had a life-threatening reaction to eggs or egg products.

How can rabies be prevented?

- Vaccinate your cat, dog, or ferret against rabies and keep its immunization up-to-date.
- If you find a dead bat, do not touch it.
- If you find a bat in the same room as a sleeping person, a child, or a mentally disabled or intoxicated person, contact your doctor or community health centre right away as the bat may have bitten the person. If possible, capture the bat so it can be tested for rabies.
 - Close all doors and windows in the area. Put on a hat, leather gloves, a long-sleeved jacket, and pants.
 - Use a blanket, net, broom or towel to catch the bat (without touching it and while protecting any exposed area such as the face). Use tongs to put it in a sealable container. Place the container in a cool, safe place away from human or pet contact or put it into the freezer, which will make the bat go into hibernation. Do not kill the bat.
 - Call your local community health centre.
 - The bat will be tested for rabies. If it does not have rabies, no treatment will be necessary.
- If bats are in your home, get professional bat control advice.
- If your pet has contact with a bat, consult your public health unit.
- If you are travelling for a month or more to a developing country where rabies is often found in different animals, consider being vaccinated for rabies before you leave. Get advice at a travel clinic.

- If you are attacked or bitten by **any** animal, you should get medical advice about rabies prevention treatment, no matter how long since you were bitten.

Contact Information

For more information contact Yukon Communicable Disease Control at 667-8323. #4 Hospital Road, Whitehorse, Yukon

In the communities call toll-free 1-800-661-0408 extension 8323.

OR

contact your local community health centre.

Adapted from BC HealthFiles