

Rabies

- Rabies is a deadly disease that is generally fatal in all species.
- It is transmitted through contact with saliva of an infected animal.
- There is no effective treatment in animals. It is virtually preventable through vaccination.

What Is It?

Rabies is a deadly disease caused by a virus that attacks the central nervous system. All warm-blooded animals, including wild animals, dogs, cats, and humans, are susceptible to it. Once clinical signs appear, rabies is generally fatal. However, the disease is also generally preventable through vaccination.

While the disease is not common, it remains prevalent in wildlife populations—primarily raccoons, bats, foxes, and skunks—that may have contact with domestic animals. Pets are at risk of contracting the disease from wild animals and potentially transmitting it to humans.

The virus can have an incubation period lasting from days to months. Rabies is usually transmitted through contact with the saliva of an infected animal. An animal's saliva becomes infective once the virus has traveled through the animal's nervous system from the initial bite site to the brain and, ultimately, the salivary glands. Pets and people usually become infected through a bite wound. Once the virus enters the salivary glands, the animal can pass the infection to other animals or humans through saliva. Animals with rabies are referred to as *rabid*.

Signs of Rabies

Clinical signs can be vague and difficult to identify. Signs can progress through several stages, and not all infected animals show evidence of all stages:

- **Early signs:** Fever, acting nervous or agitated, hiding
- **Later signs:** Aggression, increased agitation, erratic behavior
- **End stage:** Muscle weakness and paralysis, coma, death

Rabid animals can show unusual agitation or aggression or appear “drunk” or unable to walk. Seizures and drooling may also occur. Drooling results from paralysis of the throat muscles, preventing swallowing. Once signs appear, death usually occurs within 10 days.

Diagnosis and Treatment

Rabies is diagnosed in animals based on clinical signs and postmortem (after death) laboratory testing of brain tissue. There is no effective treatment in animals.

There is no effective treatment for rabies in animals. It is virtually preventable through vaccination.

Prevention

Because of the potentially serious human health implications, rabies vaccination of dogs is required by law in virtually all states, and many states also require cats to be vaccinated. Vaccination is the most effective way to prevent the disease in animals and, in doing so, to safeguard human health. In addition, it is recommended that you minimize your pets' exposure to animals that may transmit the infection.

Your veterinarian can advise you of the rabies vaccination schedule required for your state. Some states require an initial vaccination at 12 to 16 weeks of age, a second vaccine at 1 year of age, and subsequent vaccinations every 3 years. Other states require annual revaccination.

Other preventive measures include:

- Keeping your pet away from wildlife
- Ensuring that all other dogs or cats that your pet has contact with are vaccinated

Common Conditions

- Minimizing contact with stray animals; do not feed stray animals with an unknown vaccination status or allow them to remain near your home and pets

Vaccination helps protect your pet from unnecessary euthanasia or extended quarantine if your pet has contact with a rabid animal. Any pet that bites a human and has an unknown or out-of-date vaccination status may be subject to quarantine or euthanasia, depending on state laws.