

# Rabies FAQ

## What is rabies?

Rabies is a disease caused by the rabies virus. It may take several weeks or even a few years for people to show symptoms after getting infected with rabies, but usually people start to show signs of the disease 1 to 3 months after the virus infect them. The early signs of rabies can be fever or headache, but this changes quickly to nervous system signs, such as confusion, sleepiness, or agitation. Once someone with rabies infection starts having these symptoms, that person usually does not survive. This is why it is very important to talk to your doctor or health care provider right away if any animal bites you, especially a wild animal.

## Can animals transmit rabies to me?

Yes, many kinds of animal can pass rabies to people. Wild animals are much more likely to carry rabies, especially raccoons, skunks, bats, foxes, and coyotes. However, dogs, cats, cattle (cows), or any warm-blooded animal can pass rabies to people. People usually get rabies from the bite of an infected animal. Many animals, such as dogs, cats, and horses are vaccinated against rabies, but you should always wash any bite thoroughly and check with your health care provider about what to do if any animal bites you.

## How can I protect myself from getting rabies?

Be a responsible pet owner:

- Keep vaccinations up to date for all dogs, cats, and ferrets. This requirement is important not only to keep your pets from getting rabies, but also to provide a barrier of protection for you, if your animal is bitten by a rabid wild animal.
- Keep your pets under direct supervision so they do not come in contact with wild animals. If your pet is bitten by a wild animal, seek veterinary assistance for the animal immediately.
- Call your local animal control agency to remove any stray animals from your neighborhood. They may be unvaccinated and could be infected by the disease.
- Spay or neuter your pets to help reduce the number of unwanted pets that may not be properly cared for or regularly vaccinated.

Avoid direct contact with unfamiliar animals:

- Enjoy wild animals (raccoons, skunks, foxes) from afar. **Do not** handle, feed, or unintentionally attract wild animals with open garbage cans or litter.
- **Never** adopt wild animals or bring them into your home. Do not try to nurse sick animals to health. Call animal control or an animal rescue agency for assistance.
- Teach children **never** to handle unfamiliar animals, wild or domestic, even if they appear friendly. "Love your own, leave other animals alone" is a good principle for children to learn.

- Prevent bats from entering living quarters or occupied spaces in homes, churches, schools, and other similar areas, where they might come in contact with people and pets.
- When traveling abroad, avoid direct contact with wild animals and be especially careful around dogs in developing countries. Rabies is common in developing countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America where dogs are the major reservoir of rabies. Tens of thousands of people die of rabies each year in these countries. Before traveling abroad, consult with a health care provider, travel clinic, or your health department about the risk of exposure to rabies, pre-exposure prophylaxis, and how you should handle an exposure, should it arise.

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### **How is rabies diagnosed?**

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In animals, rabies is diagnosed using the direct fluorescent antibody (DFA) test, which looks for the presence of rabies virus antigens in brain tissue. In humans, several tests are required.

Rapid and accurate laboratory diagnosis of rabies in humans and other animals is essential for timely administration of post exposure prophylaxis. Within a few hours, a diagnostic laboratory can determine whether or not an animal is rabid and inform the responsible medical personnel. The laboratory results may save a patient from unnecessary physical and psychological trauma, and financial burdens, if the animal is not rabid.

In addition, laboratory identification of positive rabies cases may aid in defining current epidemiologic patterns of disease and provide appropriate information for the development of rabies control programs.

The nature of rabies disease dictates that laboratory tests be standardized, rapid, sensitive, specific, economical, and reliable.