

RABIES FACT SHEET

What is rabies?

Rabies is a viral disease most commonly spread to humans by bites from infected animals. The rabies virus attacks the central nervous system, causing disease in the brain and death.

Who can get rabies?

Humans and all warm-blooded animals can get rabies. Most cases in domestic animals occur in cats, dogs, cattle and horses. Rabies is rarely seen in rodents such as mice, rats, squirrels, chipmunks, guinea pigs, hamsters, or rabbits. Birds, turtles, lizards, fish and insects do not get rabies.

What are the symptoms of rabies?

Early symptoms in people include fever, headache, general weakness or discomfort. There may also be itching at the site of the bite. Symptoms may progress to include anxiety, confusion, agitation, and then delirium, abnormal behavior, hallucinations and insomnia. Hypersensitivity to light and sound, and difficulty swallowing can also occur. In all animals, initial signs of rabies may include fearfulness, restlessness, increased or decreased appetite, vomiting, diarrhea, a slight fever, enlargement of the pupils, hypersensitivity to light and sound and excessive salivation. Animals often have behavioral changes and may become either unusually aggressive or affectionate. In wildlife, animals that normally only appear at night may appear in the daytime.

How soon do symptoms appear?

In human cases, symptoms develop one to three months after the exposure. In most animal cases, signs develop three to eight weeks after the exposure.

How is rabies spread?

The virus is most commonly spread through saliva when an infected animal bites another animal or person. Rabies is not spread by blood, urine or feces. Infected animals can only transmit rabies after the initial signs of illness begin. In nature, wildlife such as raccoons, skunks, foxes

and bats serve as the major animals that have the virus and can spread it to other animals or people (known as reservoirs). In the District of Columbia, raccoons and bats are the most common reservoirs.

Is there a vaccine for rabies?

Yes. Rabies in humans is preventable by ensuring that pets are vaccinated and avoiding exposures with wildlife. All dogs and cats more than four months of age in the District must be vaccinated against rabies by a licensed veterinarian.

How is rabies treated?

If you are bitten by any animal, wash the wound well with soap and water. If you suspect rabies in an animal that bit you, contact your physician immediately to determine if you need to start vaccination (known as post-exposure prophylaxis). Treatment is highly effective and life-saving only if received before symptoms develop. Recovery is very rare and death usually occurs within two to 10 days. Any animal infected will die seven to 10 days after the initial signs of rabies begin.

How can people protect themselves against rabies?

You can protect yourself against rabies by vaccinating domestic animals and keeping them away from wildlife. Avoid touching, handling, feeding or other contact with wild animals. Report any stray or ill animals to DC Animal Control since these animals may be unvaccinated or ill. See your doctor for any injury due to an animal attack.

Where can I get more information?

Information about rabies and other related health topics can be found at www.cdc.gov. The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please visit www.doh.dc.gov, call (202) 442-9143, or email rabies.info@dc.gov.



DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
Center for Policy, Planning and Evaluation
Division of Epidemiology—Disease Surveillance and Investigation
899 N. Capitol Street, NE, 6th floor, Washington, D.C. 20002
www.doh.dc.gov

