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Rabies Talking Points - General Information

Rabies is caused by a virus that animals and people can get through exposure to the saliva or nervous tissue of a rabid animal and is nearly always fatal without proper post-exposure prophylaxis [treatment] (PEP).

Rabies is a zoonosis, which means it can spread from animals to people.

Rabies is 100% preventable. In most cases, preventing rabies is as simple as ensuring adequate animal vaccination and control, avoiding contact with wild animals, and educating those at risk.

People working in high risk environments, or those at risk of exposure to rabies, should receive either preventive vaccination or should immediately get the appropriate treatment once exposed from qualified Health Care Professionals.

The World Health Organization estimates about 55 000 human deaths in canine rabies-endemic areas (31 000 in Asian countries and 24 000 in African countries), annually.

South African Rabies Statistics

Although rabies is endemic in South Africa, rural areas are at particularly high risk; these include areas in the north-eastern Cape Province, eastern and south-eastern Cape Province, eastern and south-eastern Mpumalanga Province, northern Limpopo Province, Rustenburg and surrounds in North West and rural areas throughout KwaZulu-Natal Province.

Unfortunately, in spite of the many thousands of successful treatments, a total of 38 human rabies cases have been confirmed in South Africa since 2010. These cases were reported from the Free State (n=3), KwaZulu-Natal (n=10), Mpumalanga (n=3), Gauteng (1), Northwest (1), Northern Cape (1), Limpopo (n=13) provinces and Eastern Cape (n=6) were confirmed (source: NICD). This represents only laboratory-confirmed cases and is likely an under-estimate.

At least half of the people who die from rabies are children below the age of 15. Innocent of the risks, they often play with animals they don't know, and their small size makes them more vulnerable to bites to the head and neck that can lead to a more rapid onset of symptoms.

In 95% of human rabies cases, the cause was a bite or scratch from an infected dog.

To date, about 37% of all animal rabies cases have been dogs (67% from KwaZulu-Natal). The mongoose-grouping contributed more than 27% of the total rabies cases. Dogs and mongooses, therefore, represent 64% of total

cases. Species usually regarded as dead-end hosts (cattle, sheep, goats, horses and pigs), contributed 22% of the total (Bishop *et al*, 2003).

Rabies cases diagnosed between 2001 and 2006: domestic animals – 3 196 and wildlife – 615. In total, between 1928 and 2006 a total of 17 928 cases of rabies have been diagnosed in animals in South Africa (Bishop *et al* 2003). The true scale of rabies in South Africa remains clouded by the many thousands of people protected by post-exposure treatment each year after rabies exposure, and the undiagnosed human and animal rabies cases not reflected in official statistics (Bishop *et al* 2003).

Who is most at risk?

People most at risk of rabies live in rural areas of Africa and Asia, where access to healthcare and animal health facilities is limited, stray dogs are more common, and fewer pets are regularly vaccinated against rabies. Children are at the highest risk of dog rabies; about 30% to 60% of the victims of dog bites are children less than 15 years of age, and children often play with animals and are less likely to report bites or scratches.

In areas known for rabies, persons with frequent exposure to animals (e.g. veterinarians or animal health workers, wildlife specialists or researchers), are also at high risk.

RABIES PREVENTION IN ANIMALS

Rabies prevention starts with the animal owner

All dogs and cats should be vaccinated against rabies annually. Consider vaccinating valuable livestock and horses. Animals that have frequent contact with humans should be vaccinated.

Pet owners can reduce the possibility of pets being exposed to rabies by not letting them roam free.

Spaying or neutering your pet may reduce any tendency they might have to roam or fight and thus reduce the chance that they will be exposed to rabies.

Rabies is a dangerous infection. Animals suspected of suffering from rabies must never be handled under any circumstances.

Report all suspected rabid animals to the nearest state veterinarian, animal health technician or to the police.

Reduce the risk of exposure to rabies from wildlife

Don't feed or water your pets outside. Even empty bowls will attract wild and stray animals.

Keep your garbage securely covered. Open garbage will attract wild or stray animals.

Wild animals should not be kept as pets.

Enjoy all wild animals from a distance and teach children never to handle unfamiliar animals – even if they appear friendly.

If you see a wild animal acting strangely, report it to city or regional animal control officials.

What to do when your pet gets bitten by another unvaccinated animal

Consult your veterinarian immediately and have your veterinarian examine your pet and assess your pet's vaccination needs.

Contact local animal control if the bite was from a stray or wild animal.

Monitor your pet at home or in a veterinary clinic for a specified time by state law or local ordinance (usually at least 45 days), if an unvaccinated or wild animal bit your pet.

Wild and domestic animals can become infected in a fight between a pet and unknown/stray animal, which could take place even across fences.

When should you suspect that an animal is infected with rabies?

Behavioural changes such as restlessness, irritability, excitability, shyness or 'Mad Dog Syndrome' such as foaming at the mouth, growling or aggression.

This can also present in paralytic form such as the appearance of choking and dropping of the lower jaw.

A domestic animal comes home with injuries of unknown origin.

RABIES PREVENTION IN HUMANS

What to do when your pet bites someone

Seek medical attention for person bitten immediately.

Contact your local health department or local animal control.

Get your pet examined by a licensed veterinarian immediately.

Report any illness or unusual behavior by your pet to the local health department and to your veterinarian immediately.

The local public health official may require monitoring the pet at home or at a veterinary clinic for 10 days.

Symptoms of rabies in humans include

Headache and fever

Irritability and restlessness, anxiety

Muscle pains, malaise and hydrophobia (fear of water) and vomiting

Hoarse voice

Paralysis

Mental disorder

Profuse salivation

Difficult swallowing

When symptoms appear, rabies is a 100% fatal disease! Rabies is an acute disease with progressive development.

Patients usually die within two weeks after starting to display symptoms.

What to do if you are bitten by an animal

Wash the wound thoroughly with soap and water for at least 10 minutes.

Apply an antiseptic (ethanol or iodine), if available.

Contact your healthcare professional immediately.

Report the bite to the nearest state veterinarian or animal clinic. If necessary, you will be assessed for rabies post-exposure prophylaxis.

Prompt and appropriate treatment after being bitten and before the disease develops can stop rabies infection and prevent the disease.

Treatment is a medical URGENCY, not a medical emergency!

RESOURCES

Useful Websites:

Sanofi-Pasteur: www.sanofipasteur.com

Merial SA: www.merial.com

NICD (National Institute for Communicable Diseases) www.nicd.ac.za

CDC Rabies Website: www.cdc.gov/rabies

WHO Rabies Website: <http://www.who.int/rabies/en/>

NASPHV Rabies Compendium: <http://www.nasphv.org/documentsCompendia.html>

World Rabies Day Website: www.worldrabiesday.org

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