# Rabies: Deadly but preventable

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It’s not exactly a secret that dogs and cats are adorable but they can be harmful if they are not vaccinated against rabies.

The Department of Health (DOH) has recently reminded pet owners to have their pets vaccinated following new data showing a rise in deaths caused by rabies, with almost half of the incidents caused by dog or cat bites.

DOH data released last month showed that 45 percent or 193 cases of the 426 rabies-related deaths last year were due to being bitten by their pets. In addition, of the total rabies cases, 41 percent were caused by unvaccinated pets while 56 percent involved animals with uncertain vaccination status.

The highest number of cases last year were recorded in Central Luzon (56), Soccsksargen (43), and Calabarzon (35). These numbers may not even reflect the situation on the ground, such as in the Davao region with 36 deaths but officials said they were made aware that most cases did not even reach the hospitals and, thus, were not reported.

In the past five years, 1,750 Filipinos have died due to rabies. The data also showed that the number of cases almost doubled from 235 cases in 2020 to 426 in 2024. What is even more concerning is the 100-percent fatality rate last year—all 426 reported cases resulted in death.

## Clinical manifestations

It is of small consolation that there were only 55 cases reported from Jan. 1 to March 1 this year—a 39-percent decrease from the 90 cases for the same period last year—because even one rabies death is one death too many for a vaccine-preventable disease.

“Even though such deaths are preventable, there is no treatment or cure for rabies once the clinical manifestations of rabies set in,” the National Rabies Control and Prevention Program (NRPCP) covering 2020-2025 stated in its executive summary.

According to the NRPCP, an average of 250-300 rabies-related deaths occur every year mostly among children below 15 years of age and those who are poor. However, one does not need to spend for rabies vaccine shots or post-exposure prophylaxis because these are offered for free at local health centers or animal bite treatment centers. But how many of the country’s population are aware of this free health service? The DOH should be more aggressive in promoting this especially if the Philippines were to be rabies-free by 2030.

The public in general needs to be more aware about the dangers of rabies and that it is transmitted not only through bites but also scratches or saliva from a rabid animal coming into contact with an open wound, eyes, nose, or mouth. The virus infects the central nervous system and, if left untreated, attacks the brain and ultimately causes death. Only a small number of people survive rabies, thus it remains a fatal disease.

## A lifestyle for younger generation

The initial symptoms of rabies, which include fever, weakness, and swelling of the wound, usually appear two to three months after exposure. However, they can also manifest within weeks or take up to a year and could lead to fear of water and air, confusion, and paralysis, depending on the amount of virus that enters the human body as well as the location of the exposure. Once the virus spreads, it causes rapid inflammation of the brain and spinal cord, ultimately leading to death. This can happen within a few days after symptoms appear.

An understanding of this danger, especially among pet owners, should compel them to take on the responsibility of having their dogs or cats vaccinated against rabies annually.

There has been an increase in pet ownership seen especially during the pandemic and owning dogs or cats had become a lifestyle for the younger generation. A 2023 survey by the Social Weather Stations showed that 64 percent of households in the country have pets, with dogs (78 percent) and cats (50 percent) considered as the most popular.

## 100-percent preventable

Aside from being family pets, there are also farm households that employ dogs, which according to a health official, are a common source of rabies infection.

Republic Act No. 9482 or the Anti-Rabies Act of 2007 imposes a P2,000 fine on owners who do not vaccinate their pets annually. The law also requires local governments to ensure that dogs under their jurisdiction are properly immunized and to impound strays, which are another common source of infection.

Vaccination becomes an even more urgent matter during the summer season when children are on school vacation and are more inclined to do outdoor activities that could expose them to animals, whether playing in the park or in the neighborhood.

As Dr. Noreen Hynes, director of the Johns Hopkins Geographic Medicine Center of the Division of Infectious Diseases said, death from rabies can be prevented through timely and proper treatment.

However, we must also keep in mind her warning: “The bottom line is that rabies is deadly but 100 percent preventable … [but] once there’s a single symptom of rabies, it is no longer treatable.”