



Rabies Information

What is Rabies?

Rabies is a virus that infects the brain and spinal cord of animals (mammals) and humans. Rabies is transmitted to humans when saliva (spit) or nervous from infected animals comes into contact with a break in skin or a mucus membrane of a human. The most common method of transmission is through a bite. After infection, the virus slowly attacks the nervous system of humans. Usually humans will show symptoms within 3 months of becoming infected but there are rare reports of symptoms not developing for over a year. Early symptoms of rabies in people are similar to that of many other illnesses, including fever, headache, and general weakness. Later symptoms may include abrupt and unexplained behavioral changes, agitation, pain, confusion, increased saliva production, followed by progressive paralysis. Essentially all humans that are infected with rabies die if they do not receive treatment prior to the start of symptoms.

How could I have been exposed to Rabies?

The animals that are most commonly infected with rabies are bats, skunks, raccoons, foxes, dogs, wolves, coyotes and cats. If you have been around these animals and many other types of animals and were bitten, scratched, or got saliva from the animal on a mucus membrane, in your eyes, or in a break in your skin you could be infected. Also, if you improperly handled the body of an infected animal you could have been exposed. Animals that have been vaccinated against rabies are unlikely to transmit infection and pets that stay indoors and are acting normally are unlikely to be infected.

If I was exposed to Rabies how likely is it that I am infected?

Your risk for being infected with rabies depends on how likely it is that the animal you came into contact with was infected. Other key factors are the type of exposure to saliva that you had, and if you were vaccinated against rabies in the past. Also, some species of animals like bats are especially risky to have been around while others, such as rabbits, are unlikely to ever transmit rabies. If you had contact with an animal outside the U.S. your risk is higher, especially in some parts of Africa, Asia, and Central and South America. There have been estimates that 10% of dogs in Afghanistan are infected. Testing of animals that attacked humans in one part of Iraq found about a third were infected. If you have potentially been exposed, you should discuss the circumstances of your contact with either your medical provider or with Preventive Medicine so that a risk assessment can be done.

What happens if I my animal contact is found to be high risk?

If you have not been vaccinated against rabies in the past, you may be given a series of 4 shots over several weeks to prime your immune system to fight possible infection. You may also be given some antibodies (immunoglobulin) that can fight the infection while your immune system is being primed. For people that have completed vaccination against rabies prior to the exposure, you may be given two shots over 3 days.

How can I prevent exposure (and infection) to rabies in the future?

Avoid contact with wild animals and ensure that pets are vaccinated. Don't try to pet stray animals. When outside the U.S. on military deployments do NOT keep mascots. If you are traveling on leave or a short TDY to a country where easy access to rabies vaccine and antibodies is not possible, make an appointment with your medical provider or Preventive Medicine to discuss vaccination. If you are bit and receive vaccine in a foreign country, the effectiveness of the vaccine may not be the same as the U.S. version so see your medical provider or Preventive Medicine soon after you return.

If you have further questions or concerns, please contact the Evans Preventive Medicine Department at 719-526-7353 or by email at EACH_Rabies@amedd.army.mil .