

Rabies

What is rabies?

Rabies is a disease that attacks the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord) of animals and people. This disease is caused by a virus and is almost always fatal. In people, symptoms of rabies are rapidly progressive and include anxiety, confusion, hallucinations, and the inability to swallow. Rabies in humans is rare in the U.S., but rabies in certain animals, especially wildlife, is common throughout the country.

Is rabies common in New Hampshire?

Rabies in animals has been reported throughout New Hampshire. It has been identified in both wild and domestic animals.

How is rabies spread?

The rabies virus is found in the brain, spinal cord, and saliva (spit) of an infected animal and is spread when these tissues or fluids touch broken skin, open wounds, or mucous membranes (eyes, mouth, or nose). In most cases, rabies is spread by the bite of an infected animal; however, there have been cases where contact (non-bite exposures) with the virus led to rabies infection.

What kinds of animals spread rabies?

Rabies can affect any mammal (animals with hair or fur), but is more common in certain ones, such as skunks, raccoons, foxes, woodchucks, and bats. Cats, dogs, and livestock can also get and spread rabies if they do not get or are not up-to-date with rabies shots to protect them. Rabies is very rare among rabbits, hares, and small rodents.

How can I be exposed to rabies?

Rabies is generally transmitted from an infected wild or domestic animal by:

- A bite: any penetration of the skin by the teeth of an infected animal. All bites, regardless of location, pose a potential risk for rabies.
- Saliva, spinal cord, or brain tissue of an infected animal introduced into the eyes, nose, mouth, or open wounds.

How can I tell if an animal has rabies?

Rabid animals usually behave strangely. Rabid animals may stagger, appear restless, be aggressive, appear very friendly, or may show no signs of the disease at all. People should not touch or feed wild animals or stray dogs or cats.

What should I do if I see an animal that might have rabies?

Contact the local animal control authority in your community. Observe the animal from a safe distance. Do not touch it or try to capture it.

What should I do if I think I have been exposed to rabies?

If you have been bitten or scratched by an animal or have had contact with the animal's saliva, brain, or spinal cord into an open wound or your eyes, nose, or mouth, follow these steps:

- Immediately and thoroughly wash the exposed area for several minutes. Wounds and scratches should be

washed with soap and water, and mucous membranes (eyes, nose, or mouth) should be flushed with water.

- Call your local animal control authority to aid in capturing the animal for confinement and observation or testing.
- After washing, you should contact your health care provider. Describe the type of animal causing the exposure, what part of your body was involved, and the circumstances of the exposure. If indicated, your healthcare provider may recommend you receive a series of shots. These shots are very effective in protecting you from rabies and have few side effects. One of the shots (Human Rabies Immune globulin) is injected around the site of the exposure to provide immediate protection while the rabies vaccine is given in the arm muscle. Shots are no longer given in the stomach. A total of 5 shots (4 shots of vaccine and one of Human Rabies Immune globulin) are given. If you have had rabies vaccine in the past or are immunocompromised, this treatment will vary. To work best, these shots should be given as soon as possible after the exposure. If the animal has been caught and will be tested for rabies, you can usually wait to see if the shots are needed.
- If your pet has been bitten or scratched by an animal, put on gloves before touching your pet. Follow the steps above for washing the wound. Contact your veterinarian.

Can I still receive this treatment if I am pregnant?

Pregnancy is not a reason to avoid rabies vaccine or Human Rabies Immune Globulin if

you have been exposed to rabies. There are no reports of fetal abnormalities as a result of rabies shots. Pregnant women should consult with their healthcare providers.

What should I do if I come in contact with a bat?

If you are bitten or scratched by a bat—or if saliva or brain material from a bat gets into your eyes, nose, mouth, or an open wound—wash the affected area thoroughly and call your healthcare provider. Whenever possible, the bat should be captured and sent to a laboratory for rabies testing.

People usually know when a bat has bitten them. However, because bats have small teeth that may not leave obvious marks, there are certain situations when you should speak to your healthcare provider even in the absence of an obvious bite, including

- If you awaken and find a bat in your room,
- See a bat in the room of an unattended child, or
- See a bat in the room of a mentally impaired or intoxicated person.

People cannot get rabies just from seeing a bat in an attic, in a cave, or at a distance. People cannot get rabies from having contact with bat guano (feces), blood, or urine.

How can I safely capture a bat in my home?

If a bat is present in your home and it is possible you were exposed to rabies, leave the bat alone and contact your local animal control authority for assistance. If professional help is unavailable, use precautions to capture the bat safely, as described below. Do not release the bat.

What you will need:

- Leather work gloves (put them on)
- Small box or coffee can
- Piece of cardboard
- Tape

When the bat lands, approach it slowly, while wearing the gloves, and place the box or coffee can over it. Slide the cardboard under the container to trap the bat inside. Tape the cardboard to the container, and punch small holes in the cardboard, allowing the bat to breathe. Contact your local animal control authority to make arrangements for rabies testing.

If you see a bat in your home and you are sure no human or pet exposure has occurred, confine the bat to a room by closing all doors and windows leading out of the room except those to the outside. The bat will leave. If not, it can be caught, as described, and released outdoors away from people and pets.

How can I prevent rabies?

- Do not touch, feed, or pick up wildlife or stray animals, even if they seem healthy or friendly. If you see an animal acting strangely, call your local animal control authority.
- Teach children to avoid wildlife and all animals they do not know well.
- Vaccinate pets. Vaccination is required by law in New Hampshire for dogs, cats, and ferrets 3 months of age and older, even if they stay indoors. Make sure to keep your pet's vaccinations up-to-date.
- Do not let pets roam free. Keep pets indoors at night.
- If a pet has been in a fight with another animal, wear waterproof gloves when touching your pet. Call your veterinarian.
- Keep trash cans closed and stored so as not to attract animals.
- Feed pets indoors.
- Observe animals from a distance. There is no such thing as a friendly and safe wild animal. Do not handle sick or injured animals.
- Cap your chimney with screens and

block openings in attics, cellars and porches to keep wild animals out of your home.

- If you have bats in your home, call a professional about bat-proofing your home.
- People such as animal control officers, veterinarians, veterinarian assistants, and wildlife workers who are at risk for contact with rabies or potentially rabid animals should talk with their healthcare providers about receiving rabies vaccine before exposure to the virus.

For specific concerns about rabies, call the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services, Communicable Disease Control Section at 603-271-4496 or 800-852-3345 x4496, your health care provider, or your veterinarian. For further information about rabies, refer to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/rabies, the the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services website at www.dhhs.nh.gov, the NH State Veterinarian's Office at 603-271-2404, or the NH Department of Fish & Game at 603-271-3421.