

Rabies is a rare but deadly disease caused by the rabies virus, which attacks the nervous system. Rabies can be prevented, but once symptoms appear, it is invariably fatal.

Symptoms

- Early signs of rabies in humans includes fever or headache, then changes quickly to nervous system signs like confusion, sleepiness, or agitation.
- Once a person develops nervous system signs, they will likely die of the disease – that is why it is very important to talk to your health care provider right away if any animal bites you.
- Signs of rabies in an animal are initially behavior changes like unusual aggressiveness or tameness. Many animals have a marked change in voice. Animals usually die within a few days after showing signs of rabies.

Transmission

- Rabies is most often found among wild animals such as raccoons, bats, skunks, coyote, and foxes. Domestic animals like cats, dogs, horses, and livestock can get rabies if they are not vaccinated.
- Rabies is spread through contact with infected saliva. This usually happens during a bite.
- Contact with the brain or other nervous tissue of an infected animal may also spread the disease.
- Other bodily fluids like urine, blood, feces, and skunk spray do not contain enough virus to transmit the disease.

Treatment

- There are no standard treatments that are successful once signs are apparent.

Prevention

- Human pre-exposure vaccines are available for those at high risk of exposure.
- Human post-exposure (before signs of disease) treatment includes the vaccine and is effective in preventing the disease. Rabies immunoglobulin is administered around the bite and 4 vaccines are given in the arm over the course of 3-4 weeks.
- Licensed vaccines are available for dogs, cats, ferrets, and horses.

Additional Information

After a bite or possible exposure, wash the wound thoroughly with soap and water. The rabies virus is easily destroyed by common disinfectants like soap. Contact your doctor and local health department immediately.

WHO rabies fact sheet <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs099/en/>

CDC rabies homepage http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/submenus/sub_rabies.htm

All information is general in nature and is not intended to be used as a substitute for appropriate professional advice.

