



Rabies Facts

What is Rabies?

Rabies is a virus of the central nervous system (the brain and spinal cord) that can affect *any* mammal. Rabies is widespread throughout Pennsylvania.

What are the signs of Rabies?

- Rabies signs are grouped into two forms known as either the “Furious” form of rabies or the “Paralytic” (or “Dumb” form).
- An animal may show signs of only one type or progress from one form to the other.
- ***Some animals will show no signs of rabies other than death***
- The “*Furious*” form of rabies is more familiar to most people. Signs may include: aggression, loss of fear, daytime activity by nocturnal species, attraction to noise and human activity, excess vocalization, dilated pupils, difficulty swallowing, loss of appetite, restlessness, and/or biting at objects and other animals. Animals may or may not drool.
- The “*Paralytic*” form of rabies may include symptoms such as: decreased activity, incoordination, hind limb weakness, acting “dull.” Cats may meow excessively. As the disease progresses, the animal may drop its lower jaw, drool, be unable to swallow, become paralyzed and finally die.
- ***Note:*** It is important to realize that not all animals show every sign. Most neurological or behavioral abnormalities could potentially be rabies.

Incubation Period

- This is the period of time from the exposure to rabies virus until the animal finally becomes sick and/or acts differently and is capable of infecting other animals or people.
- The incubation period can be as short as two weeks or in very rare cases as long as one year.
- During the **incubation period**, the animal **cannot** transmit rabies and its behavior remains normal.
- During the incubation period, there may be time for the vaccine to prevent the animal from developing disease and prevent it from shedding or transmitting virus.

CAUTION: mammals may have virus in their saliva and be able to transmit virus a short period of time before clinical signs start.



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Exposure

- **Rabies in humans is a preventable disease if exposure is recognized and treatment is begun in a timely manner.**
- Exposure to rabies may occur by any of the following (other possible routes of exposure exist but are rare):
 - A direct bite from a contagious rabid mammal
 - A scratch from a rabid mammal that breaks the skin
 - Saliva or neural tissue from a contagious rabid animal contacting an open wound or break in the skin.
 - Saliva or neural tissue from a contagious rabid animal contacting mucus membranes such as in the eyes, nose or mouth.
- Virus can survive on inanimate objects for as long as it takes for the saliva to completely dry. Sunlight will kill the virus, freezing and moisture can help preserve it. The virus is killed by most disinfectants.
- There has never been a documented case of rabies transmitted to humans from an inanimate object.
- Immediately washing the bite or scratch with soap and water can greatly reduce the risk of rabies.
- **Bats** continue to be the number one cause of human rabies cases in the United States. The Centers for Disease Control now recommends that every bat found inside a building or home be tested for rabies if there was possible human contact (*e.g. if people were sleeping in the room*). This is because it is possible to be bitten by a bat and not even know it.

What happens if a person thinks they have encountered a rabid animal or have been bitten by a mammal?

- The first thing to understand is how a person gets rabies from an animal. See section above on *exposure and remember only mammals can transmit rabies*.
- *By law, all animal bites in PA must be reported by the medical professional to the PA Department of Health.*
- If the person has been bitten, scratched or otherwise exposed to saliva by a mammal that is suspected of having rabies, the animal must be tested for rabies. The only way to test for rabies is to euthanize the animal and have it submitted to an approved laboratory for rabies testing (see section “Submitting Animals for Rabies Testing”). The Department of Health should be notified by the medical professional and consulted for advice on whether or not the exposed person should start receiving rabies treatment.
- If a person has been bitten by a mammal which is not suspected of having rabies, then the animal **must** be observed for a period of time during which the animal is prevented from exposing other people or animals. The Department of Health must be notified by the medical professional and will provide advice on how to proceed



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- If the animal is clinically normal (not showing any signs of rabies) by the end of the observation period then it was very unlikely to have had rabies in its saliva on the day it bit the person and it will be released. If the animal shows signs of rabies or dies before the observation period is up, it should be submitted for rabies testing. In some situations, such as when the mammal is a wild animal, euthanasia may be preferred over a period of observation.
- If a mammal that was showing signs of rabies has bitten or exposed a person then the animal **must** immediately be euthanized and submitted for rabies testing. The Department of Health and the Department of Agriculture should both be notified.
- What if the animal runs away? If a human has been bitten or scratched by a mammal, either domestic or wild, but the animal is not available for observation or testing, seek medical assistance. The medical professional must notify the county or local Department of Health office.

What happens to my pet or other domestic mammal if it is bitten or scratched by a rabid animal?

- By PDA regulations, a domestic animal that is exposed to a rabid animal must be quarantined.
 1. Length of quarantine depends on rabies vaccination status of the exposed domestic animal. If the domestic animal is unvaccinated (or its vaccination status has expired) at the time of exposure to a rabid animal, a 180-day quarantine will be imposed. If the domestic animal that was exposed to a rabid animal was legally vaccinated for rabies and the vaccination status was current at the time of exposure, 90-day quarantine will be imposed.
 2. The PA Department of Agriculture (PDA) will decide the appropriate quarantine duration and will manage the quarantines.
 3. Post-exposure vaccination of the exposed animal is permitted by PDA.
 4. PDA will NOT seize or euthanize your pet or domestic animals for being exposed to rabies!
 5. However, in some circumstances, euthanasia of the exposed domestic animal may be recommended.



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What does it mean for my pet to be quarantined?

- The pet must be under the owner's control and on his property during the period of quarantine. The owner must take precaution to prevent exposure to other people and animals during this time.
- A quarantine sign will be posted by PDA. It is unlawful to remove a quarantine sign.

Submitting Animals for Rabies Testing

- If the suspect is a wild mammal; contact the PA Game Commission (PGC) for help in capturing and submitting the animal. See the blue pages of your phone book for the number of your local PGC office or go to <http://www.pgc.state.pa.us/pgc/site/default.asp>.
- If the suspect is a domestic mammal, then consult your veterinarian for help in euthanizing and submitting the animal.
- You may also call your local PDA Regional office for information on submitting mammals for rabies testing. See <http://www.agriculture.state.pa.us/agriculture/cwp/view.asp?a=3&q=127151> to find the appropriate contact information for the regional office that covers your area.
- Detailed information on submission is available on the PADLS web site: <http://www.padls.org>

How can you prevent Rabies?

- Vaccination of domestic mammals for rabies is very effective.
- ***Vaccination is recommended for all species for which there is an approved rabies vaccine. (Discuss vaccination of species for which there is not an approved rabies vaccine with your veterinarian).***
- By PA law, dogs and cats must be vaccinated for rabies by 3 months of age and vaccination must be kept up to date.
- Do not handle wildlife.

Questions?

- Contact your regional PA Department of Agriculture office for questions about domestic animals at <http://www.agriculture.state.pa.us/agriculture/cwp/view.asp?a=3&q=127151>
- Contact your regional PA Game Commission office for questions about wildlife at <http://www.pgc.state.pa.us/pgc/site/default.asp>
- Contact the PA Department of Health for questions concerning people at 1-877-PAHEALTH or <http://www.dsf.health.state.pa.us/health/site/default.asp>