



Durham Region Health Department Facts about...



Rabies

What is it?

Rabies is a serious but preventable viral disease affecting the central nervous system of humans and warm-blooded animals. Once symptoms appear, the disease is fatal.

How is it spread?

Rabies is transmitted through the bite or scratch of an infected animal, or through direct contact with saliva from an infected animal. In Canada, the animals that most often transmit rabies are wildlife species, such as raccoons, foxes, skunks, and bats. Domestic animals such as cats, dogs, and cattle can also get rabies if exposed to an infected animal. Rabies virus is spread from one animal to another, or from an animal to a human, through close contact with infected saliva.

What are the symptoms?

Early rabies symptoms can include fever, tiredness, headaches, anxiety, and irritability. Pain, tingling, numbness, or itching around the area where an animal has bitten, scratched, or licked may also be felt. Symptoms worsen quickly as the virus attacks the central nervous system. Neurologic symptoms can take two forms: encephalitic rabies and paralytic rabies. Encephalitic rabies can include anxiety, seizures, confusion, hyperactivity, hallucinations, strange behaviour, and general agitation, fear of water (hydrophobia), and fear of fresh air or drafts of air (aerophobia). Paralytic rabies can result in weakness and gradual paralysis.

How is it treated?

One of the most effective methods to decrease the chance for infection involves thoroughly washing the wound with soap and warm water, and promptly seeking medical attention. It's critical to contact your health care provider immediately so that preventive treatment can be started. Treatment involves multiple injections of rabies post-exposure vaccine (PEP) and an injection of antibodies to help your body fight the virus. This treatment is safe and effective and is ordered by your physician from the Health Department.

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How can I protect myself?

Avoid direct contact with unfamiliar animals:

- Enjoy wild animals (raccoons, skunks, foxes, etc.) from afar. **Do not** handle, feed, or unintentionally attract wild animals with open garbage cans or litter.
- Never adopt wild animals or bring them into your home. **Do not** try to nurse sick animals to health. Call your local animal control agency for assistance.
- Call an animal control or wildlife removal agency to assist in trapping wild animals that are causing damage to your property.
- Teach children never to handle unfamiliar animals, wild or domestic, even if they appear friendly.
- Take measures to discourage wild animals from taking up residence in your home or on your property. For example, cover up potential entrances, such as uncapped chimneys, loose shingles and openings in attics, roofs, and eaves.
- Do not touch dead or sick animals directly. Use a barrier such as heavy-duty gloves and a shovel to bury or dispose of dead animals and, ensure your pets are not exposed to the carcasses.
- Prevent bats from entering living quarters or occupied spaces in homes, churches, schools, and other similar areas where they might contact people and pets.
- When travelling abroad, avoid contact with wild animals and be especially careful around dogs in developing countries.
- Wash any wound from an animal thoroughly with soap and water and seek medical attention immediately.

Be a responsible pet owner:

- Keep vaccinations up to date for all dogs, cats, and ferrets. Current immunization against rabies is required by Ontario Regulation 567/90 under the *Health Protection and Promotion Act* for cats and dogs over three months of age.
- Keep your pets under direct supervision to avoid contact with wild animals.
- Call your local animal control agency to remove any stray animals from your neighborhood.
- Spay or neuter your pets to help reduce the number of unwanted pets that may not be properly cared for or regularly vaccinated.
- **Report all animal bites to humans to the Health Department at 1-800-841-2729.**

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