

Terrestrial Rabies Fact Sheet

1. **What is rabies?** - Rabies is a viral disease affecting the nervous system. It is usually transmitted to humans via the saliva of an infected animal through a bite.
2. **Is rabies in Pennsylvania?** - Rabies continues to be a significant public health problem in the Commonwealth. Since the year 2000, between 350 and 500 animals are annually confirmed in the laboratory to have rabies. About half of the animal rabies cases are raccoons, followed by skunks, cats, bats, and foxes. In contrast to the situation in animals, human rabies in Pennsylvania is rare. The last diagnosed human case in the Commonwealth was in 1984.
3. **What is the incubation period for rabies in humans?** - The incubation period for rabies in humans is usually 3 – 8 weeks, but can be as short as one week to as long as nine years. It is never too late to seek medical attention for a potential rabies exposure.
4. **What are the symptoms of rabies in humans?** - The symptoms consist of irritability, fatigue, headache, fever, and pain or itching at the exposure site. The disease eventually progresses to paralysis, spasms of the throat muscles, seizures, delirium, and death. By the time symptoms of the disease appear, rabies rarely can be successfully treated, and virtually all cases are fatal.
5. **How does a person become infected with rabies?** - After a bite from a rabid animal with rabies virus present in its saliva, the virus deposited in the bite wound slowly replicates in adjacent skeletal muscle cells. When the rabies virus concentration in the wound becomes sufficient, it enters the nearby nerves. The virus then spreads to the brain, and then travels back through the nerves to the salivary glands, where virus is shed in the saliva.
6. **What should I do if an animal bites me?** - The first step in rabies prevention is to immediately wash the wound with plenty of soap and warm water, and then promptly seek medical care. If the circumstances of the exposure warrant, human rabies vaccine may be prescribed. The vaccine is a series of four shots given in the arm (or thigh for small children) on days 0, 3, 7 and 14 after presentation to the health care provider. Rabies immune globulin is also given on day zero (the first medical visit). Rabies vaccine is highly effective in preventing the disease after an exposure, if given before any symptoms develop.
7. **What should be done with the biting Animal?** - If acting normally, dogs, cats, and ferrets may be observed for 10 days from the day of the bite. If the dog, cat, or ferret is healthy after 10 days, it did not have rabies in its saliva at the time of the bite. Raccoons, foxes, and skunks should be humanely killed, and the heads sent to the appropriate laboratory for rabies testing. If an animal must be shot to prevent its escape, care should be taken not to damage the brain. A veterinarian and local health authorities should routinely be consulted to advise if further action is necessary for other animals and other situations.

8. What can communities do to control rabies?

- a. All animals should be restrained and leashed when in public;
- b. Stray and ownerless dogs should be impounded;
- c. All dogs and cats should be registered, licensed and vaccinated;
- d. Mass vaccination clinics should be developed and supported; and
- e. Wild animals should not be handled or kept as pets.

9. For more information about rabies: <http://www.cdc.gov/rabies/>

This fact sheet provides general information. Please contact your physician and/or veterinarian for specific clinical information related to you or your animal.