

For More Information...

Looking for additional details on the rabies virus and how it impacts human and animal health? Visit pa.gov/guides/foodborne-animal-transmitted-illnesses/#rabies or scan the below QR code using any smartphone's camera app.



Bureau of Animal Health & Diagnostic Services

2301 North Cameron Street
Harrisburg, PA 17110-9449
717-772-2852
RA-ahds@pa.gov
agriculture.pa.gov



Bureau of Laboratories

110 Pickering Way
Exton, PA 19341-1310
877-PA-HEALTH (877-724-3258)
RA-dhrabies@pa.gov
health.pa.gov



Headquarters

2001 Elmerton Avenue
Harrisburg, PA 17110-9797
717-787-4250
RA-comments@pa.gov
pgc.pa.gov

Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture
Pennsylvania Department of Health
Pennsylvania Game Commission



Rabies Virus

What You Need To Know



Photo by Jacob Dingel



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Pennsylvania Department of Health
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Rabies Overview

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

Rabies is a significant public health concern because it can be transmitted from animals to humans and is nearly 100% fatal without post-exposure treatment.

Each year in the Commonwealth, thousands of rabies tests are performed and typically 350 to 500 mammals test positive. The majority of these detections occur in raccoons, bats, domestic cats, and skunks. In Pennsylvania, the most recent case of human rabies occurred in 1984.

When To Suspect Rabies

Signs vary but mammals infected with rabies can exhibit unusual behavior such as aggression, vocalization, excessive drooling, tameness or a lack of fear of humans, difficulty standing or walking, paralysis, circling, incoordination, or head tilt. Mammals infected with rabies can also appear normal or have very subtle or non-specific clinical signs of infection.

Determining Exposure

Just handling the carcass of a suspected rabid mammal does not necessarily mean that exposure occurred. A domestic animal or human is considered potentially exposed to rabies under the following circumstances:

- They have been bitten or scratched by a suspected rabid mammal.
- They have an open wound, break in the skin, or any mucous membranes (eye, mouth, nose) that has come into contact with saliva or brain tissue from a suspected rabid mammal.

Rabies testing of wild mammals should always be pursued under the following circumstances:

- Whenever a bat is found in the same room with a sleeping person, an unattended child, an intoxicated or impaired person, or anyone who is unsure if they were bitten or scratched.
- Whenever a person is bitten or scratched by a free-ranging wild mammal, regardless of the mammal's behavior or clinical signs.

Rabies Testing Timeline

Rabies testing can only be performed on dead mammals. Suspect cases in the Commonwealth are submitted to laboratories overseen by the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Health. While rabies testing in Pennsylvania is always conducted at no cost to the public, submitters may be responsible for courier fees or additional costs depending on how the submission is made.

If a rabies test is positive or conclusive results cannot be determined, Department of Agriculture or Department of Health personnel will notify both the victim and the submitter by phone within 24 hours of testing. Negative results are communicated by email, fax, phone, or mail within 72 hours of testing. Since rabies infections are nearly always fatal without post-exposure treatment, inconclusive results should always be treated as if they are positive.

Next Steps If Rabies Positive

If you or another human were exposed to a rabies-positive mammal, immediately consult with your physician and the Department of Health to begin post-exposure treatment.

If your domestic animal was exposed to a rabies-positive mammal, immediately consult with your veterinarian and the Department of Agriculture. Your domestic animal may require a post-exposure rabies vaccination and will need to be quarantined and observed for clinical signs of rabies. While typically occurring within weeks to months, it can take up to a year for clinical signs to appear in certain domestic animals such as dogs.

These next steps should not be delayed. For post-exposure treatment to be effective, it must be given prior to the development of any symptoms or clinical signs.

Whom To Call

Any cases involving suspected rabid wildlife should be reported to the Game Commission. If the case only involves domestic animals (pets, livestock), contact the Department of Agriculture. If you believe you or another human have been potentially exposed to rabies, immediately contact the Department of Health.

Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture
Pennsylvania Department of Health
Pennsylvania Game Commission

