



## **Rabies**

Rabies is a deadly disease of warm-blooded animals. It is caused by a virus and attacks the nervous system. It is transmitted through animal bites, or through exposure to the saliva of an infected animal. Rabies is most often found in raccoons, skunks, foxes, cats, bats and groundhogs. It is rarely reported in small rodents, such as squirrels, hamsters, guinea pigs, gerbils, chipmunks, rats, and mice. Most recent human cases in the US have been associated with bats. Bats present a unique challenge, because they are difficult to capture, and their small teeth may not leave marks on the skin.

Rabies accounts for an estimated 55,000 deaths annually worldwide, with the majority of these occurring in the rural areas of Asia and Africa. There have only been 27 human cases of rabies in the United States since 1990. About 40,000 people in the US seek treatment for potential rabies exposure from animal bites per year, costing more than \$300,000,000 annually.

If a person is bitten by a wild animal or otherwise becomes potentially exposed to rabies, prompt medical attention is critical. Left untreated, rabies is almost always fatal. The site of the wound should be cleaned with soap and water or a disinfectant. A physician will decide the proper course of action. Usually, vaccination against rabies will begin immediately. This treatment consists of 5 shots given over the course of 28 days. If the wild animal can be trapped safely, it can be held in quarantine to determine if it shows signs or symptoms of rabies. If the animal must be killed, every effort must be made to ensure that the head is not damaged. If the bite was from a domestic animal (such as a dog or cat), get the owner's name, address and telephone number. If it can be proven that the animal has current rabies immunizations, a tetanus shot may be all that is required for treatment.

Exposure to rabies can be prevented. Do not approach, handle or feed wild or stray animals. Have your pets vaccinated against rabies and keep the vaccinations up to date. Do not leave pets unattended outside or allow them to roam free. Teach children to stay away from wild animals and animals that they do not know. If handling a wild or stray animal is unavoidable, wear heavy leather gloves. Better yet, contact your local animal control officer to handle the situation.

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