

! Rabies Virus: A Fatal Threat to Animals (And People) !

Rabies is a severe, invariably **fatal viral disease** that attacks the **central nervous system (CNS)** of all warm-blooded animals, including humans. Understanding how it spreads and its effects on our beloved pets is crucial for prevention.

What is Rabies and How is it Transmitted?

Rabies is caused by a virus in the *Lyssavirus* genus.

- **Transmission:** The virus is primarily spread through the saliva of an infected animal, usually via a **bite** or when infected saliva contacts an open wound or mucous membranes (eyes, nose, mouth).
- **Reservoirs:** In the United States, the primary carriers (reservoirs) are wild animals like **raccoons, bats, skunks, and foxes**. Domestic animals, such as dogs and cats, usually become infected after contact with one of these wild carriers.

How Rabies Affects the Animal Body (Pathogenesis)

1. **Entry and Replication:** The virus enters the body, usually through a bite wound. It may replicate for a short period in the muscle tissue near the site of entry.
2. **CNS Invasion:** The virus then enters the **peripheral nerves** near the wound site and travels along the nerves toward the **spinal cord and brain (the Central Nervous System)**. This travel time is the **incubation period**, which can range from a few weeks to several months.
3. **Brain Damage (Encephalitis):** Once in the brain, the virus multiplies rapidly, causing acute inflammation of the brain (**encephalitis**). This leads to the characteristic neurological signs and behavioral changes.
4. **Salivary Gland Spread:** From the brain, the virus moves *back* down the peripheral nerves to various organs, including the **salivary glands**. At this stage, the animal begins to shed the virus in its saliva and is infectious, typically a few days before clinical signs appear. **Death usually occurs within 7 to 10 days after the onset of symptoms.**

Rabies in Household Companion Animals (Dogs and Cats)

Rabies symptoms in pets can be highly varied and can mimic other conditions. Any sudden, drastic change in behavior or unexplained paralysis should be considered a potential rabies warning sign.

Pet	Form of Rabies	Key Symptoms (Often appear in stages)
Dogs	Furious Form: Marked by aggression and excitability.	Sudden, uncharacteristic aggression (biting/snapping), restlessness, excessive barking/howling, overreaction to sound/light, drooling, difficulty swallowing.
	Dumb (Paralytic) Form: Marked by lethargy and paralysis.	Unexplained lethargy or depression , hiding, incoordination, unsteadiness, paralysis (especially of the lower jaw, making swallowing impossible), excessive salivation/drooling ("foaming at the mouth" is often due to an inability to swallow).
Cats	Often presented as the Furious Form more consistently.	Extreme irritability , striking or biting without provocation, abnormal, loud vocalizations, nervousness, and lack of coordination. Can also exhibit paralysis similar to the dumb form in dogs.
Both	Early (Prodromal) Stage: Subtle and lasts 2–3 days.	Vague signs like fever, loss of appetite, anxiety, sudden behavioral changes (a friendly pet becomes shy or irritable, a timid pet becomes bold), and sometimes licking or chewing at the bite site.

IMPORTANT: Once clinical signs appear in any animal, the disease is universally fatal. **There is no treatment for rabies in animals.**

✓ **Prevention is Your Only Defense!**

Rabies is 100% preventable through vaccination. Protect your family and your pets by taking these crucial steps:

- **Vaccinate:** Ensure all dogs, cats, and ferrets are vaccinated against rabies according to local laws and your veterinarian's schedule. **Keep their vaccinations current.**
- **Supervise:** Do not allow pets to roam unsupervised, especially at night when wildlife is most active.
- **Avoid Wildlife:** Never approach, touch, or feed wild animals, even if they appear tame or injured. **If a wild animal is acting strangely (e.g., a nocturnal animal out during the day, loss of fear of humans), assume it is rabid.**
- **Secure Your Home:** Prevent wildlife from entering your home (e.g., seal holes where bats or rodents could enter the attic/basement).



What To Do If Your Pet is Bitten or Scratched

1. **Do NOT handle the wild animal.** Isolate your pet immediately from people and other pets.
2. **Contact your veterinarian and local public health officials immediately.** They will advise you on the next steps based on your pet's vaccination status and local regulations.
3. **If a person is bitten or scratched:** Immediately wash the wound thoroughly with soap and water and seek medical attention.

