

COLORADO DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENT

Rabies Fact Sheet

What is rabies?

Rabies is a viral disease that affects mammals. Rabies virus infects the nervous system and causes swelling of the brain and death. Any mammal can get rabies. However, most rabies infections (92%) in the United States are found in wildlife such as raccoons, skunks, bats, and foxes. The other 8% of rabies infections are in domestic animals such as cats, dogs, and cattle.

How is rabies spread?

Rabies virus is found in the saliva of infected animals, and is most often spread from one animal to another by bite. The virus multiplies at the bite site and travels through the nerves to the brain. It also goes to the salivary glands. Rabies virus is not found in the blood of infected animals.

Rarely, rabies has been spread to organ recipients when they received tissues from organ donors who died of rabies. In a few instances rabies has been spread to people by aerosols (droplets in the air). You can also get rabies if saliva from a rabid animal gets in your eyes, nose, or mouth, or in an open sore or wound.

How do I know if an animal has rabies?

Animals with rabies often behave strangely. However, you cannot tell an animal has rabies just by looking at it. Rabid wildlife may come out in the daytime when they normally only come out at night. They may also approach or attack people, pets, or livestock instead of avoiding them. Rabid animals may have trouble walking, flying, eating, and drinking because the virus affects the nervous system. The only way to tell for sure if an animal has rabies is to test the animal for the virus.

Can people get rabies?

People can get rabies too. There are no special signs and symptoms of rabies in people; the illness begins as a flu-like syndrome. Typically people have a fever and headache and may feel weak or uncomfortable. There may be pain, itching, numbness, or tingling at the bite site. Symptoms may begin four to eight weeks after the exposure or bite, but in some cases people become ill much later after the exposure. As the virus infects the nervous system people may have trouble breathing and swallowing. Some infected people will become paralyzed, lose consciousness and die. Other infected people may become very excited and hyperactive, and can die from a heart attack. Rabies almost always causes death. There are no good treatments for rabies in people or in animals.

Can rabies be prevented?

Rabies can be prevented. Vaccines are available for domestic animals and livestock. These vaccines can prevent companion animals such as dogs and cats from getting rabies from wildlife. Horses, cattle, and other livestock should also be vaccinated, especially since it is hard to know if pastured animals have been exposed to rabid animals. If our dogs and cats and other animals are vaccinated they will not get rabies,

and they will not be able to spread rabies to us. A veterinarian should administer rabies vaccines.

There are rabies vaccines for people too. Vaccines that prevent rabies can be administered after a rabid animal bites people; this is called post-exposure prophylaxis. People in some professions such as wildlife rehabilitators, animal control officers and veterinarians can receive rabies pre-exposure prophylaxis. These people are at higher risk of being bitten by rabid animals because of their jobs, and will benefit from getting the vaccine early in their careers before they are exposed. Unlike people, animals cannot be vaccinated for rabies *after* they are exposed to a rabid animal.

What do I do if an animal bites me?

The first thing to do if you are bitten by an animal is to wash the wound with soap and water for at least 15 minutes. If the animal is rabid this will help wash out some of the virus. Do this right away. Also make a note of what animal bit you, if it was acting strangely, and where the animal went. Then contact your healthcare provider, [your local health department](#), animal control and/or the Colorado Division of Wildlife.

If the animal that bit you is wildlife it can be captured and tested for rabies so you will know if you are at risk and need to be vaccinated for rabies. If the animal is a domestic animal or livestock it can be quarantined and watched to see if it becomes ill from rabies. Many people are bitten by animals each year, and very few of those animals are rabid. However, rabies is a very serious disease and you should consult with your local health department to see if they recommend rabies post-exposure prophylaxis for you.

What is the rabies vaccine for people?

If you are bitten or otherwise exposed to a rabid animal you can be vaccinated against rabies. There is a safe and effective rabies vaccine for people that is given in the arm. There are four doses. The first vaccine dose is usually given as soon as possible after the bite or exposure. At that time you may also get a dose of rabies human immune globulin (HRIG) at the bite site. The other three doses of vaccine are given on days 3, 7, and 14 from the day you get the first dose. Usually your healthcare provider will administer the vaccine to you.

What should I know about rabies in Colorado?

In Colorado most rabies is found in [skunks](#) and [bats](#). Rabies infections in other wild and domestic animals are rare, though there have been a few rabid foxes and raccoons in Colorado. Rodents such as squirrels and woodrats, and lagomorphs such as rabbits and hares are rarely found rabid in the United States. This is because these small mammals are unlikely to survive an attack from a rabid animal.

To stay up to date on rabies activity in your area [visit your local health department's website](#).

To learn about what animals have been tested for rabies in Colorado visit the CDPHE Rabies Data and Statistics tab [here](#). To learn more about rabies in the United States [click here](#) to visit CDC's website. For information about bats and rabies [click here](#).