What Is Rabies?

Rabies is a severe viral infection of the brain and spinal cord that results in death.

Who Gets Rabies?

All warm blooded mammals including humans are susceptible to rabies. Rabies is most commonly found in bats, skunks, raccoons and foxes. Dogs, cats and ferrets can get rabies if they are not vaccinated. Rabies is very rare among small rodents such as mice, rats, gerbils, chipmunks, hamsters, rabbits and squirrels. Livestock are also low risk for transmitting the virus.

How Common Is Rabies?

Wild animals account for the majority of all rabies cases in United States. Human rabies is rare in the United States, averaging 2-3 cases per year. In recent years, bites from rabid bats are the primary source of human rabies in the United States. In Missouri most of the animals testing positive for rabies are bats. The last human rabies death in Missouri was reported in 2008.

How Is Rabies Spread?

The rabies virus lives in the saliva and nervous tissue of an infected animal. It is transmitted by a bite or scratch from an infected animal. It can also be transmitted if the saliva touches broken skin, open wounds or the lining of the mouth, nose or eyes.

A bite or scratch from a bat can inflict minor injury and be difficult to detect as bats have small needle-like teeth. For that reason, if you find a bat in your home you should call Animal Control to capture the bat for rabies testing and seek medical advice. If the bat is not available for testing, rabies prophylaxis should be considered.

What Are The Symptoms Of Rabies In Humans?

Rabies is almost always fatal in humans. Early symptoms may include headache, fever, fatigue, anxiety and unusual sensations at the site of the bite (itching, tingling, burning or cold). Late symptoms may include confusion, seizures, paralysis and death.

Symptoms generally appear 4-6 weeks after exposure, but onset may occur from a range of 5 days to a year or longer.

What To Do If You Are Bitten?

- Immediately flush the wound with soap and water.
- If the animal is a pet, get the owner's name, address and phone number.
- If the animal is a stray, try to notice any features of the animal that will allow you to identify it later.
- Call animal control to report the bite or bat in your home (*see phone numbers on the back*).
- Seek medical evaluation of the bite and a tetanus shot, if necessary.

How Can You Prevent Rabies?

- Make sure that your pets are vaccinated against rabies and that their shots are up-to-date.
- Avoid wild animals, especially bats, skunks, foxes and raccoons. Avoid stray animals.
- Do not handle dead, sick, or injured wild animals yourself; call animal control. If you must handle the animal, use heavy gloves or a tool to avoid direct contact.
- "Bat-Proof" your home by putting a cap on your chimney and closing any openings (the size of a dime or larger) in your home that lead to the outside or attic.

How Is Rabies Diagnosed?

In humans, rabies is diagnosed by a history of exposure, development of symptoms and detection of rabies virus in brain tissue. In dogs and cats, rabies is diagnosed by quarantine of the animal for 10 days after a bite. If the animal develops symptoms or dies in the 10 days, the brain is sent for testing. In wild animals there is no defined quarantine period. If rabies is suspected in a wild animal, the brain is sent to the lab for testing.

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