Is rabies really a threat to my pet?

Rabies is a threat—to your pet and to you. Rabies is a viral disease that affects the nerves and brain. It affects all warm-blooded animals, including dogs, cats, ferrets, and people. No treatment exists for rabies. Once an animal or person gets the disease, he will die. If your dog, cat, or ferret is not vaccinated against rabies, you and your pet are at risk.

How can my pet get rabies?

The main source of rabies virus infection is a bite from an infected wild animal such as a fox, raccoon, skunk, or bat. Less commonly, rabies can be contracted when the virus comes into contact with cuts on the skin or the tissue of the nose or eyes. For example, the rabies virus in infected bats can become aerosolized, posing a threat to pets or people who breathe it in while in caves.

If another animal bites my pet, will he get rabies?

If your pet is bitten by another animal, it does not necessarily mean your pet will get rabies. Only if the biting animal is infected with rabies will your pet be at risk for getting the disease. Not all animals that bite have rabies!

If the animal that bites your pet is carrying the rabies virus in its saliva, the biting animal will generally exhibit abnormal behavior 10 to 14 days after the time of the bite, which is the reason for the rabies quarantine period required by state or provincial law.

The length of time between exposure to the rabies virus and the appearance of physical signs of the disease varies based on the location of the bite and what kind of animal was bitten. If your dog or cat does contract the rabies virus after being bitten, it may take several weeks before the pet shows physical signs of the disease. If a wild animal contracts the disease, it may take months. Once an animal contracts rabies, the disease begins an irreversible process that affects the nervous system and brain.

It is highly unlikely that pets that have been vaccinated properly will contract the disease. Therefore, vaccination is the best prevention for your pet. Even if your pet is an indoor pet and never goes outside, a wild animal or bat that accidentally enters your house may still bite him. And indoor pets sometimes get loose and roam outdoors, which puts them at risk. Also remember that most states, provinces, and local municipalities require vaccination of dogs and cats against rabies by law.

How can I recognize a rabid animal?

An unexplained change in behavior is the most common sign of rabies in an animal. A friendly pet may turn aggressive or act strangely. A wild animal, normally shy, may not be afraid when approached by people. This disease affects the nerves and brain; therefore, an infected animal may act in many different ways.

What should I do if I suspect an animal has rabies?

If you think an animal may have rabies, be extremely careful—avoid all contact! If you suspect your pet may have rabies, isolate him from other animals and people until you receive further instructions from your veterinarian. If you suspect a wild animal near your home or workplace has rabies, do not go near the animal or allow others to come in contact with it. Contact the authorities in your area and allow them to locate and capture the animal.

By law, you must report your suspicion of this disease in order to protect the public. Notify your veterinarian and the local animal-control department immediately (in Canada, call the local police and health-control office).

What happens to an animal that bites another animal or a person?

Wild Animals

If a wild animal (such as a raccoon or skunk) bites a pet or a person, the animal should be captured, if at all possible, so that it can be examined. Do not risk getting bitten yourself by trying to kill or capture the wild animal. Contact the appropriate authorities (animal-control department or local police) to capture the animal. The public-health department likely will euthanize the animal and examine its brain tissue for signs of rabies.

Dogs and Cats

If a vaccinated dog or cat bites a person, the authorities should quarantine the animal and monitor it according to state or provincial law (generally 10 to 14 days) to ensure that no threat of rabies exposure exists. If an unvaccinated dog or cat bites a person, it can be quarantined or euthanized depending on the circumstances. State and provincial laws regarding the handling of such animals vary.

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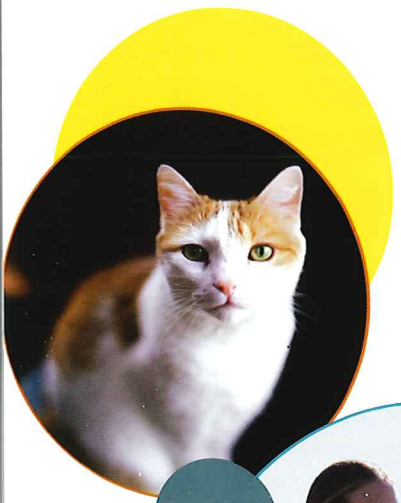
The prevalence of rabies differs from region to region, but the virus is found throughout North America. A rabies vaccine should be administered at intervals recommended by your veterinarian and as required by state or provincial law. Vaccination is the best prevention!



Our Plan for Vaccinating Your Pet

AAHA press

HealthyPet.com

For more information about pet health care, ask your veterinary health-care team or visit www.healthypet.com.

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Rabies

AAHA's Pet Health Brochure Series

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