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Fact Sheet: Rabies

The rabies virus is transmitted through saliva or brain/nervous system tissue of mammals. Once symptoms of rabies appear, the disease is nearly always fatal. For this reason, preventing animal bites and receiving prompt medical care is especially important. Common carriers of rabies in the U.S. include raccoons, bats, skunks, and foxes. Domestic animals, such as cats and dogs, may also be carriers, especially stray animals or in international locations where vaccination is uncommon.

Symptoms

Early rabies symptoms in humans, include weakness or discomfort, fever, and headache. There may be discomfort or a prickling or itching sensation at the place of the bite. Within days, an infected person may become anxious, confused, and agitated. As a person gets sicker, they may become delirious, hallucinate, be unable to sleep, and unable to swallow or quench their thirst.

Rabid animals may display the following symptoms:

- Loss of fear toward humans
- Glazed or unfocused stare
- Frequent shifting of aggressive behavior from one object to the next
- Stubborn, undeterred approach
- Staggered gait
- Biting the ground or other objects
- Excessive salivation
- Lack of response if struck by thrown object

Prevention

- Avoid coming into contact with potentially affected animals.
- Pre-exposure immunization may be recommended for people involved in any activities that might bring them into direct contact with potential carriers in rabies-affected areas or who may be in remote areas a long way from medical assistance. Contact your primary care physician about your risk of exposure to rabies, if pre-exposure vaccination is recommended, and how to handle an exposure should it arise.

First Aid Treatment

- If bitten or scratched, immediately clean the wound thoroughly with soap and water.

- It's important to know that, unlike most other animals that carry rabies, many types of bats have very small teeth which may leave marks that disappear quickly. If you are unsure if you have been bitten, seek medical advice to be safe.
- Address any trauma associated with the wound with supportive first aid measures.
- Seek medical attention, even if you have had pre-exposure immunization. Indicate that you had contact with an animal that may have been rabid. Physicians will likely administer post-exposure prophylaxis by a combination of administration of human rabies immune globulin (HRIG) and vaccine.

References and Additional Resources

- CDC [Rabies](#)
- CDC [Traveler's Health Rabies](#)
- Adapted from *Rabies Fact Sheet*, by University of Maryland: Department of Environmental Safety, Sustainability & Risk (<https://essr.umd.edu/about/research-safety/field-research-safety/planning>) with permission.