

Rabies

Fact Sheet



Maine Center for Disease
Control and Prevention
An Office of the
Department of Health and Human Services

Paul R. LePage, Governor

Mary C. Mayhew, Commissioner

What is rabies?

Rabies is a viral disease that affects the brain and spinal cord. It is almost always deadly. Rabies in people is very rare in the United States, but rabies in animals – mainly wildlife – is common in most parts of the country including Maine.

What are the signs and symptoms?

In people, it may take many weeks or even years for signs of rabies to show. Most often, people start showing signs of the disease 1 to 3 months after infection. Early signs include fever or headache, changing quickly to mental signs such as unclear thinking, sleepiness, and eventually death. This is why it is very important to talk to your healthcare provider right away if you are bitten by any animal.

Animals with rabies usually act strangely once the virus gets to their brain, but signs can vary. Some animals may seem shy and fearful while others become mean. Some rabid animals stumble as though drunk, seem lame, or seem very friendly. Because you cannot tell by looking at an animal if it has rabies, avoid contact with all wild animals – especially bats, skunks, foxes, and raccoons.

How is it spread?

The rabies virus lives in the saliva, brain, and spinal cord of infected animals. Rabies is spread when infected animals bite or scratch another animal or human. Less commonly, the virus can be spread if saliva or tissue from the brain or spinal cord of an infected animal touches broken skin or gets into the eyes, nose, or mouth. These are called rabies exposures. Rabies is not spread by petting a rabid animal or by touching blood, urine, or feces from a rabid animal.

How can you tell if an animal has rabies?

Maine Health and Environmental Testing Laboratory (HETL) in Augusta can test the brain of suspect rabid animals that exposed a human or domestic pet.

Which animals can get rabies?

Rabies can infect any mammal, or animal that has fur, but is most common among bats, skunks, foxes, and raccoons. Rabies is very rare among small rodents like squirrels, rats, mice, and chipmunks. Rabies is rare in vaccinated pets and farm animals. Make sure that all pets and farm animals stay up to date on rabies shots to prevent them from getting and spreading rabies.

How common is rabies in Maine?

Animal rabies is found regularly among wild animals and sometimes among unvaccinated pets and farm animals in Maine. The most commonly infected animals are raccoons, skunks, foxes, and bats. Rabid animals have been found in every county in Maine.

What if you think you were exposed to rabies?

If you were possibly exposed, follow the steps below to prevent rabies:

1. Wash the wound with soap and water right away.
2. Call your healthcare provider. He or she will tell you if you need to be treated for rabies exposure. Maine CDC can help assess rabies exposures and make public health recommendations.
3. Contact your town's Animal Control Officer (ACO) if the animal involved is a pet. If the animal is available, it should be confined and observed (quarantined) for 10 days from the date of exposure to rule out rabies.
4. Contact your local Game Warden if the suspect animal is wild. If it is available, it should be tested for rabies at the State lab.
5. If your pet is exposed, notify your veterinarian and the town's ACO or local Game Warden.

What is the treatment for rabies exposures?

Treatment consists of a combination of vaccine and immunoglobulin shots. This is called “post-exposure prophylaxis”. If the animal can be quarantined or tested for rabies, treatment can usually wait until results come back or the animal successfully completes 10 day quarantine.

- An unvaccinated person should get 4 doses of rabies vaccine – one dose right away, along with another shot called Rabies Immune Globulin (RIG), and 3 more doses of vaccine on the 3rd, 7th, and 14th days after the first shot is given.
- A person who got pre-exposure vaccine, like a vet, should get 2 doses of rabies vaccine – one dose right away and one 3 days later; no RIG is needed.
- A person with a weakened immune system should receive 5 doses of rabies vaccine – one dose right away, along with RIG, and 4 more doses on the 3rd, 7th, 14th, and 28th days after the first shot is given.

How can you prevent rabies?

- Vaccinate your pets against rabies. In Maine, it's the law for all cats and dogs to be vaccinated for rabies.
- Enjoy all wild and unfamiliar animals from a distance, even if they seem friendly.
- Wear protective gloves if you plan to have contact with wild animals for your job or when hunting.
- Fasten trashcan lids tightly. Garbage attracts animals like skunks and raccoons.
- Keep pets on your property, on a leash, or in a fenced in area to lessen the chances of them contacting a wild animal. It is against the law to allow your dog to roam free.
- It is against the law to keep wild animals such as skunks or raccoons as pets. You must have a license to keep wild or exotic animals.
- Talk to a trained exterminator or contractor about "bat-proofing" your home.
- Do not handle sick or hurt wild animals yourself; call a local Game Warden. If you must touch a dead animal, use heavy gloves, sticks, or other tools to avoid direct contact with the animal and its saliva.
- Animal Control Officers, veterinarians and their assistants, and wildlife rehabilitators who have a lot of contact with stray animals or wildlife, should consider getting pre-exposure rabies vaccine.

Where can I get more information?

For more information, contact Maine CDC by calling 1-800-821-5821 or visiting the website <http://www.mainepublichealth.gov/rabies>. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website - <http://www.cdc.gov/rabies> – is another excellent source of health information.

Important Telephone Numbers

General rabies questions/exposure assessment:
Maine CDC Disease Reporting and Consultation
(800) 821-5821 TTY (800) 606-0215

Lab testing questions:
Health and Environmental Testing Laboratory
(207) 287-2727

Livestock questions:
Office of the State Veterinarian (207) 287-3701

Wildlife questions:

- Weekdays:
Ashland (207) 435-3231
Bangor (207) 941-4440
Gray (207) 657-2345
Greenville (207) 695-3756
Sidney (207) 547-5300
- Nights/weekends (State Police):
Augusta (800) 452-4664
Gray (800) 482-0730
Houlton (800) 924-2261
Orono (800) 432-7381

Domestic pets questions:

- Contact your Local Animal Control Officer by calling the Town Office or State Police (after hours)
- Contact your veterinarian