



Rabies

What is rabies?

Rabies is a viral disease that damages the brain and spinal cord of warm-blooded animals. The virus is present in the saliva and blood tissue of the central nervous system of rabid animals. Rabies can infect any warm-blooded animal (including humans) and is usually fatal. There is no cure for rabies. Postexposure rabies treatment (treatment given after contact with the rabies virus), if given promptly and correctly, may be effective in preventing rabies disease from developing.

How is rabies spread?

Rabies virus is found in the saliva of the infected animal and is usually transmitted through a bite or infected saliva getting into an open wound or mucous membrane (eyes, nose, mouth). Not all exposures transmit the disease. When sufficient rabies virus enters the body, it travels to the brain and spinal cord. Once signs of the disease appear, the infected person or animal will usually die within days.

How can I tell if an animal has rabies?

You can't. Animals infected with the rabies virus in their saliva can act normally. When signs of infection do appear, they may include changes in normal behavior such as acting fearful, nervous, lethargic, or even friendly. Other signs may include aggression, foaming at the mouth, biting at real or imaginary objects, staggering, stumbling and paralysis. The best way to confirm that an animal has the rabies virus is to test its brain in a qualified laboratory. If the suspicious animal is a dog or cat, it must be confined and observed for a certain period of time.

Which animals can get rabies?

Raccoons account for the majority of animals testing positive for rabies in North Carolina. Animals such as foxes, skunks, bats, dogs, cats and livestock have also been diagnosed with rabies. Rabies is rare among small rodents (squirrels, chipmunks, mice and voles), opossum and rabbits.

What's different about bats?

Bats can also transmit rabies. Because the size of the bat's bite may be so small as to go unnoticed, even brief physical contact with a bat should be considered an exposure risk. Finding a bat in a room with any sleeping person who is not able to definitely state that no physical contact occurred should also be considered a potential exposure. In any of these cases, the exposure should be brought to the attention of local animal control so that the bat can be captured safely and tested for rabies.

What if someone I know is exposed?

If there is a possibility that the rabies virus has been transmitted, the wound or exposed area should be vigorously scrubbed with soap and warm water for at least ten minutes, using a brush if possible. Contact your health care provider or health department for exposure evaluation and further treatment if necessary. Call your local animal control agency (641-5990) to capture the animal for rabies observation or testing. If it is possible to do so safely, detain the animal until animal control arrives.

For more information, contact Guilford County Department of Public Health at 336-641-7777 or www.myguilford.com