

Rabies – Information for Animal Owners

What is rabies?

- Rabies is a disease of the nervous system caused by a virus that affects humans and animals. This virus infects the brain and ultimately causes death.
- Rabies is a disease of warm-blooded animals, most commonly foxes, skunks, bats, cattle, horses, dogs and cats.
- In Saskatchewan, rabies is most often diagnosed in skunks and to a lesser extent, bats.

How is rabies spread?

- Exposure to rabies is considered to have occurred when:
 - an infected animal's teeth penetrate the skin as in a bite;
 - the saliva or other potentially infectious material (brain tissue) of an infected animal comes into contact with scratches, abrasions, cuts or mucous membranes (mouth, nose or eyes) of an individual or animal.

What are the symptoms of rabies?

- It can be weeks or months before rabies symptoms begin to show. This can vary depending on the type of species and location of wound.
- The first symptoms of rabies are similar to any flu-like illness; an individual may experience fever, headache, or general discomfort.
- Within days, the symptoms can progress to anxiety, confusion, abnormal behaviour, hydrophobia, and hallucinations.
- Once symptoms appear, the disease is almost always fatal. Therefore, any person who has been exposed (bitten, scratched, or as above) to a potentially rabid animal should see a physician as soon as possible.

How can you tell if an animal has rabies?

- Animal symptoms may not be easily recognized. However, you should be suspicious if an animal:
 - behaves in either an unusually sluggish or aggressive manner;
 - attacks a person or another animal without reason;
 - appears to have difficulty swallowing (causing drooling or foaming at the mouth);
 - has a decreased appetite or refuses to eat;
 - becomes partly or entirely paralyzed meaning it may have difficulty moving all or parts of its body.

How can I protect myself and my animals from rabies?

- Have your pets vaccinated regularly.
- Keep your pets on a leash.
- Use caution when approaching animals that don't know you, even when they are accompanied by their owner.
- Don't go near or touch stray animals.
- Don't leave garbage outside – it attracts stray and wild animals.
- Do not handle sick or dead wild animals without using protective gloves.
- Identify and cover locations (e.g. chimneys, windows, etc) where wildlife, including bats, could enter your home.
- Call a veterinarian or conservation officer if you notice unusual animal behaviour or if your pet is bitten by a wild animal.

What should I do if I suspect someone has been exposed to rabies?

- Flush the wound immediately with copious amounts of soap and water.
- The exposed person should see a doctor as soon as possible. The doctor will consult with a public health official to determine if preventative treatment is necessary.
- If possible, owners should confine their pet and observe it for changes in behaviour.
- If it is a wild animal, contact a conservation officer for assistance.

What should I do if my animal bites someone?

- **Do not destroy the animal.** Speak with a public health official if your animal has been involved in a biting incident. If you have not heard from a public health official within 24 hours, contact your local public health office to report the incident.
- The main objective in monitoring animals is to ensure the person who was exposed receives appropriate care.
- The incident will be investigated and the level of risk of rabies for the animal will be determined by a public health official and/or a veterinarian.
- Dogs, cats and ferrets must be isolated (not allowed to run at large) and observed for 10 days after biting a human. During observation you must monitor the animal for abnormal behaviours. If the animal is well after the isolation it may be released.
- Care should be taken to prevent contact with non-household people and other animals while the animal is under observation and until rabies is ruled out.
- If you are not able to observe your animal contact your local veterinarian or animal hospital to make arrangements. There may be a charge for this service.
- If the animal has been destroyed, testing for rabies is required so that appropriate care of the exposed person can occur. Do not dispose of the animal's body until you have spoken to Public Health.
- Owners are asked to cooperate in providing details on the health of their animal to public health officials following an exposure.

Why are cats, dogs and ferrets observed for 10 days?

- Animals are only able to transmit rabies virus through their saliva in the late stages of the disease.
- We know that if a cat, dog or ferret remains healthy 10 days after the bite, there was no rabies virus in the saliva at the time of the exposure.

What is Public Health's Role?

- Public health officials investigate all human exposures to domestic or wild animals to determine if there is a risk of rabies from the incident. This also will reduce the risk of others being exposed to the animal.
- The goal is to assist the family in maintaining the health of the animal while preventing further exposures to the animal during the observation period.
- Public Health officials will ask about:
 - the events of and leading up to and during the incident;
 - the vaccination history of the animal;
 - other details that may help with the risk assessment;
 - other people who may have been exposed to the animal and will investigate each exposure to determine if rabies immunizations are necessary in other situations.
- If rabies cannot be ruled out, the exposed person requires a series of immunizations over 3-4 weeks.

For more information on protecting your family and pets from rabies please contact your local veterinarian or the following websites:
[Http://www.saskatchewan.ca/business/agriculture-natural-resources-and-industry/agribusiness-farmers-and-ranchers/livestock/animal-health-and-welfare/rabies](http://www.saskatchewan.ca/business/agriculture-natural-resources-and-industry/agribusiness-farmers-and-ranchers/livestock/animal-health-and-welfare/rabies)
<http://www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/health/accessing-health-care-services/immunization-services>