

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Rabies

Massachusetts Department of Public Health, 305 South Street, Jamaica Plain, MA 02130

What is rabies?

Rabies is a disease of the brain and spinal cord and is caused by a virus. Rabies is a fatal disease. Rabies in humans is very rare in the U.S., but rabies in certain animals—especially wildlife—is common in many parts of the country, including Massachusetts.

How is rabies spread?

The rabies virus lives in the saliva (spit) and nervous tissues of infected animals and is spread when they bite or scratch. The virus may also be spread if saliva from an infected animal touches broken skin, open wounds or the lining of the mouth, nose, or eyes. In caves crowded with many bats, it may be possible to inhale the virus floating on bat saliva in the air.

What kinds of animals spread rabies?

The rabies virus can infect any mammal (if it has hair or fur, it is a mammal), but is more common among certain ones like bats, skunks, foxes, and raccoons. Cats, dogs, and livestock can also get rabies—and spread it to their owners—if they do not have special shots to protect them. Rabies is very rare among small rodents like squirrels, rats, mice, and chipmunks. Fish, reptiles (such as snakes, turtles and lizards), amphibians (such as frogs and salamanders), and insects (bugs) cannot get or spread rabies.

How common is animal rabies in Massachusetts?

Hundreds of animals are found to have rabies each year in Massachusetts. Wild animals most commonly found to be rabid include raccoons, skunks, bats, woodchucks and foxes. Over one hundred cats have tested positive for rabies in Massachusetts.

How can you tell if an animal is rabid?

Rabid animals often behave strangely after the virus attacks their brains. Rabid animals may attack people or other animals for no reason, or they may lose their fear of people and seem to be unnaturally friendly. Not all rabid animals act in these ways, however, so you should avoid all wild animals – especially bats, skunks, foxes, and raccoons. Also, you should not feed or touch stray cats and dogs.

What should you do if you think you've been exposed to rabies?

If you have been bitten or scratched by a stray or wild animal, or by a pet or farm animal that has been behaving oddly, follow these steps:

1. Wash the wound with soap and water **right away** for at least ten minutes.
2. Call your health care provider and local board of health as soon as you finish washing. They will help you decide if you need to be treated for rabies. It is important to follow their instructions exactly.
3. Contact your local animal control officer to catch or find the animal that scratched or bit you. Your local board of health can tell you how to have it tested by the State Rabies Lab, if appropriate.

If your pet has been bitten or scratched by an animal that you think may be rabid, put on gloves before touching your pet. Follow the steps above but call your pet's veterinarian instead of your own doctor as in step 2.

What is the treatment for people exposed to rabies?

The treatment for people exposed to rabies involves two medications. One, called rabies immune globulin (or RIG), contains antibodies to fight the virus and is given once. The other medication is rabies vaccine, which ensures long-lasting protection, and is given as five shots over the course of a month. (Rabies shots are no longer given in the stomach.) People who received the full series of rabies shots in the past need only two rabies vaccine shots. To work best, the medications should begin as soon as possible after the bite or scratch. However, if the animal has been caught and will be tested for rabies, you can wait for the test results to see if the shots are necessary.

How can you prevent rabies?

- Avoid wild animals, especially bats, skunks, foxes, and raccoons. Do not feed or pet strays. Avoid any animal—wild, farm or pet—that you do not know. Report any animal that behaves oddly to your local animal control official.
- Teach your children to avoid wildlife, strays, and all other animals they do not know well.
- Do not handle dead, sick, or injured wild animals yourself; call the police or animal control officer. If you must handle the animal, use heavy gloves, sticks or other tools to avoid direct contact.
- Make sure your pets are vaccinated against rabies and that their shots are up-to-date. By law, all dogs, cats and ferrets must be vaccinated against rabies.
- Feed pets indoors and keep them indoors at night. If they are outside during the day, keep them on a leash or fenced in so they cannot wander. It is possible for vaccinated pets to get rabies. Pets allowed to roam freely are more likely to get rabies and possibly expose people and other pets in your home.
- Fasten trash can lids tightly. Garbage attracts animals (like skunks, raccoons, and strays) looking for an easy meal.
- It is against state law to keep wild animals such as skunks or raccoons as pets. There are no rabies vaccines for most wild species.
- Cap your chimney with screens and block openings in attics, cellars, and porches to keep wild animals like bats and raccoons out of your home.
- If you have bats in your house, talk to a professional about bat-proofing your home.
- Animal control officers, veterinarians, their assistants, and others who have a lot of contact with strays or wildlife should get routine rabies vaccinations to protect themselves before they are exposed to the virus.

Where can you get more information?

- Your doctor, nurse or health center
- Your local board of health (listed in the phone book under local government)
- Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Division of Epidemiology and Immunization at (617) 983-6800 or toll-free at 1-888-658-2850 or on the MDPH website at <http://www.state.ma.us/dph/>

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