

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Rabies

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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 New Jersey.

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. Stray cats, stray 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 New Jersey?

Rabies in raccoons first appeared in New Jersey in 1989. Since then, raccoon rabies has been found in all cities and towns in the state. Suburban areas in which raccoons, people, and pets are in close proximity have had the highest number of cases. Rabies in bats has been a problem throughout New Jersey at least since 1939.

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, 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.
4. Report the incident to your local health department

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 only 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 after exposure to a rabid animal. 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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 clinic
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website at: <http://www.cdc.gov/>
- The Burlington County Health Department at (609) 265-5548
- The New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services (NJDHSS) at (609) 588-7465 or on the NJDHSS Website at <http://www.state.nj.us/health>