

# PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

# Rabies

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

## What is rabies?

Rabies is a very serious disease that affects the brain and spinal cord of mammals (if an animal has hair or fur, it is a mammal). Cats, dogs, raccoons, coyotes and foxes are mammals, as are people. Rabies is caused by a virus and almost always causes death. Rabies is usually a disease of animals, but it can spread from an infected animal to a person.

## How is rabies spread?

Rabies spreads when an animal with rabies bites another animal or person. The rabies virus is in the saliva (spit) of infected animals. Infected animals can also spread rabies if their saliva gets into a scratch or other wound, or the eyes, nose or mouth of another person or animal.

## Does rabies cause death in people in the U.S.?

Yes, but it is very rare for people to get rabies in the United States. Of the 55,000 people who die of rabies every year around the world, only one or two of those deaths occur in the United States. The last death from rabies in a Massachusetts resident was in 1983, associated with exposure in Nigeria.

## How common is rabies in animals in Massachusetts?

Fairly common. Since 1992, more than 5,000 animals have tested positive for rabies in Massachusetts. Most of these cases occurred in wild animals like raccoons, skunks, bats, woodchucks and foxes, but every year some pets (especially cats) and farm animals also get rabies. Fortunately, there is a vaccine to protect dogs and cats from rabies.

## Is there something special about bats and rabies?

Yes. Most of the recent human cases of rabies in the US have been caused by bats. Any possible contact with bats should be taken seriously. This includes a bite or scratch, waking up with a bat in the room or finding a bat in a room with a young child or mentally impaired person. Bat teeth are so small that a person may not realize they have been bitten, so bat exposures need to be carefully evaluated.

## What kinds of animals don't get rabies?

Birds, fish, reptiles (such as snakes, turtles and lizards), amphibians (such as frogs and salamanders) and insects (bugs) cannot get or spread rabies.

## Can you tell if an animal is rabid?

**You cannot tell if an animal has rabies just by looking at it.** Rabid animals may act strangely after the virus affects their brains, or they may seem just fine. Sometimes, rabid animals may aggressively attack people or other animals. Sometimes, a test is done on an animal's brain to find out if it had rabies.

## How is rabies prevented in people?

After a person is exposed to rabies, they can be given shots (called "immune globulin") around the bite or scratch to help fight the virus where it entered the body. They will also get 4 or 5 vaccinations (shots) in their arm over several weeks. These shots will also help the person fight the virus. As long as the shots are given before the person starts to get sick, this will prevent them from getting rabies. If a person does not get the shots and then gets sick with rabies, there is no effective treatment. Rabies is almost always fatal.

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

If you are bitten or scratched by an animal:

- Wash the wound with soap and water **right away** for ten minutes.
- Call your health care provider or local board of health. They can help you determine if you need to be treated for a rabies exposure.
- Your local animal control officer may be able to catch the animal that scratched or bit you. Wild animals should be tested immediately for rabies. Cats, dogs, ferrets and cows can be watched for 10 days. If they stay healthy, they did not expose you to rabies.

## What should you do if you find a bat in your home?

- If the bat is found in a room with a sleeping person, an unattended young child, a mentally incapacitated person or a pet, the bat should be safely captured and tested for rabies. Information about how to safely capture a bat can be found in the document called *Capturing a Bat: What You Need and How To Do It* at [www.mass.gov/dph/rabies](http://www.mass.gov/dph/rabies).
- Call your local board of health for help in getting the bat tested for rabies.
- Call your healthcare provider, your local board of health or the Massachusetts Department of Public Health to help you determine if you need to be treated for a rabies exposure.

## What should you do if you think your pet has been exposed to rabies?

If your pet is bitten or scratched by another animal:

- Call your veterinarian to help you determine if the animal needs medical attention.
- Your local animal control officer may be able to catch the animal that scratched or bit your pet. Wild animals should be tested immediately for rabies.
- In some cases, it may be necessary to confine your animal and watch it to see if it develops signs of rabies. Your local animal inspector can help you determine if this is necessary.

## How can you help prevent rabies in Massachusetts?

- Teach children to never approach animals they don't know – even if they appear friendly.
- Report any animal that behaves oddly to your local animal control official.
- Enjoy wild animals from a distance. Do not keep wild animals as pets. This is against the law in Massachusetts.
- Make sure your pets are vaccinated against rabies. By law, all dogs, cats and ferrets must be regularly vaccinated against rabies.
- Don't feed or water your pets outside. Even empty bowls will attract wild and stray animals.
- Keep your pets in a fenced yard or on a leash and do not let them roam freely.
- Keep your garbage securely covered. Open garbage will attract wild or stray animals.
- Keep your chimney capped and repair holes in attics, cellars, and porches to help keep wild animals like bats and raccoons out of your home.

## Where can you get more information?

- Your doctor, nurse or clinic, or 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 [www.mass.gov/dph/rabies](http://www.mass.gov/dph/rabies)
- Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources, Division of Animal Health at (617) 626-1786 or on the MDAR website at [www.mass.gov/agr](http://www.mass.gov/agr)