

Rabies

What is rabies?

Rabies is a viral infection that attacks the nervous system of animals and humans. While some animals may recover from infection, most die, as do almost all infected people. Only a couple of people in the whole world are known to have survived rabies over the past 150 years.

How do people get rabies?

People are usually exposed to rabies through the bite of a rabid animal. There have been a few cases of rabies in people who were not bitten by rabid animals, but the methods of virus transmission in those cases were extremely unusual. It is fairly safe to say that a person must be bitten by a rabid animal in order to contract rabies.

I have been bitten by an animal. What are my chances of getting rabies?

There is no easy answer to this question. Many things must be thought-out; particularly the type of animal involved in the bite as well what you were doing when the animal bit you.

First of all, bites from pet rodents such as mice, gerbils, hamsters, and from pet rabbits, are not uncommon and pose no risk of rabies. The same is true from bites from wild rats, mice, squirrels, chipmunks, moles and related animals. Unless there are very unusual circumstances, such as you are sitting on your deck or porch and a squirrel, for example, suddenly runs across the yard and attacks you, there is no reason to be concerned about rabies.

The vast majority of people who suffer animal bites in Kansas City are bitten by a dog or a cat. Within Kansas City there have been no rabid dogs since prior to 1955 and no rabid cats since 1980 -- the same cannot be said of rural areas in the metropolitan area or elsewhere in Missouri and Kansas. More cats are found rabid than dogs throughout the United States. This is because more communities require and enforce rabies vaccination for dogs than do for cats. Kansas City requires vaccination for both dogs and cats.

Dog and cat bites should immediately be washed thoroughly with soap and water and then evaluated by a physician for possible anti-rabies treatment as well as for treatment for possible bacterial infection of the bite wound. The conditions surrounding the bite, the vaccination status of the biting animal, and a number of other things are considered before recommending that a person receive rabies vaccination for a bite. In most instances, rabies treatment will not be needed. This does not mean that quick

evaluation of the biting incident can be delayed. There is only a limited time frame (up to 10 days counting the day of the bite as day 1) in which treatment can begin. And, the closer the bite wound is to the head that time frame begins to get shorter.

Any bite by a wild carnivore, such as a raccoon or skunk, or by a bat needs fast medical evaluation. In most instances, rabies vaccination for the person bitten will be recommended. There will be times when the Health Department will recommend rabies vaccination for persons who have been around a bat, but who were not bitten. Each bat exposure needs to be evaluated. Almost every case of human rabies in the United States during the 1990s was due to bat rabies.

Bites by pet ferrets cannot be ignored. Every year, pet ferrets in the United States are diagnosed with rabies. Many owners allow their ferrets to run free indoors and outdoors and the ferrets can encounter other rabid animals. A rabies vaccine is available for ferrets.

What can I do to protect my family from rabies?

One of the most important things you can do is to make sure that your pet dogs and cats are vaccinated against rabies and receive their booster shots when due. Your vaccinated pets are your first line of defense against rabies. The vaccination will protect your pet from contracting rabies and bringing it into your home.

Should your pet come into contact with a rabid animal, if it is not vaccinated against rabies, you will be required to place the animal in strict isolation for 6 months (at your expense) or have it put to death. Therefore, it is in your pet's best interest to be vaccinated.

Also, your pet's rabies vaccination status is an important issue if your animal should happen to bite someone else.

The second major thing you can do is to teach your family members not to approach any strange dogs or cats and not to try to hand feed or pet wild animals. Animals with rabies can be either very aggressive and attack, or they may be very show very little movement which some people may interpret as meaning the animal is friendly.

My physician has recommended rabies treatment following a bite. What does this involve?

Post-bite rabies treatment consists of five (5) shots of vaccine. Following the first shot the remaining doses are given 3, 7, 14 and 28 days later. Each shot is given in the arm. Additionally, a shot of rabies immune globulin may be given with the first dose of rabies vaccine.

Reactions to the vaccine and globulin are not common. Pain, redness, swelling or itching may occur at the site of injection. Rarely do symptoms such as headache, nausea, or low-grade fever occur.

I am planning a trip to another country. Should I be concerned about rabies?

Yes. Rabies occurs in almost every country of the world, so reasonable safety measures towards domestic and wild animals are called for.

The developing countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America have additional problems in that dog rabies is common and that post-bite treatment may be difficult to get hold of. You may wish to consider pre-exposure vaccination to rabies before you go away on your trip. Consult your physician about this. Pre-exposure vaccination requires three (3) shots over a 21 or 28 day period, so you need to plan ahead.

Animal bites and bats in your home or apartment should be reported to Animal Control at 816-513-9800.

If you have questions about rabies, please call the Kansas City Health Department at 816-513-6152.