

# PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

# Rabies



## Burlington County Health Department

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**Public Health**  
Prevent. Promote. Protect.  
Burlington County Health Department  
*Health Starts Here*

## What is rabies?

Rabies is a viral disease that infects the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord). It is a fatal disease if left untreated. Rabies in humans is very rare in the US, but rabies in certain animals—especially wildlife—is common in many parts of the country.

## 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 another animal or human. Transmission of rabies has also been reported through contamination of mucous membranes (eyes, nose, and mouth) and breathing in airborne droplets, but this is rare. All organ and blood transfusions in the US are checked for rabies.

## What kinds of animals spread rabies?

The rabies virus can infect any 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 rabies vaccines to protect them. Rabies is very rare among small rodents like squirrels, rats, mice, and chipmunks. Fish, reptiles (i.e., snakes, turtles and lizards), amphibians (i.e., frogs and salamanders), and insects cannot get or spread rabies.

## 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 all wild animals should be avoided – especially bats, skunks, foxes, and raccoons. Stray cats and dogs should not be touched. Contact animal control if there is a stray animal or possible missing pet.

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

Once a person begins showing symptoms of rabies, the disease is almost always fatal. 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 doctor and local health department 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.**
4. 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 are the symptoms of rabies?

The first symptoms of rabies may be very similar to those of the flu including general weakness or discomfort, fever, or headache. These symptoms can last for days.

There may be also discomfort or a prickling or itching sensation at the site of bite, progressing within days to symptoms of partial paralysis, anxiety, confusion, agitation or anxiety. As the disease progresses, the person may experience delirium, abnormal behavior, fear of water, hallucinations, and insomnia

Once clinical signs of rabies appear, the disease is nearly always fatal, and treatment is typically supportive.

## What is the treatment for people exposed to rabies?

**Treatment for rabies is only effective before a person starts showing symptoms. If you think you have been exposed to rabies, contact a doctor immediately.** If someone has been bitten by an animal known to have rabies, they will receive a series of shots to prevent the virus from infecting them. If the animal that bit the person cannot be found, it may be safest to assume that the animal has rabies.

Rabies shots include:

- A fast-acting shot (rabies immune globulin) to prevent the virus from infecting a person. Part of the injection is given near the area where the animal bit, as soon as possible.
- A series of rabies vaccines to help your body learn to identify and fight the rabies virus. This is given as a shot into the arm. It consists of 4 injections over 14 days.

## How can you prevent rabies?

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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. 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.
- If you have bats in your house, talk to a professional about bat-proofing your home.

## Where can you get more information?

- Your doctor, nurse or health center
- The Burlington County Health Department, Communicable Disease Program (609) 265-5533 or online at [www.co.burlington.nj.us/health](http://www.co.burlington.nj.us/health)
- New Jersey Department of Health, Communicable disease Services
  - 609-826-4872 and 609-826-5964 Daily Monday through Friday
  - 609-392-2020 Nights, Weekends and Holidays
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at [www.cdc.gov/rabies](http://www.cdc.gov/rabies)
- Mayo Clinic website at [www.mayoclinic.org](http://www.mayoclinic.org)