

RABIES

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Rabies is a severe, fatal disease that causes encephalitis in warm blooded animals. It is a vaccine preventable disease in humans, dogs, cats, ferrets, and some domestic livestock. All mammals are susceptible to rabies and it is nearly always fatal. The disease can be prevented in humans with timely and appropriate treatment by post exposure vaccinations. The disease most often occurs in wild animals, especially skunks, raccoons, bats, and foxes.

Raccoon rabies is present in the raccoon population in almost every county in North Carolina. Small mammals such as rats, mice, squirrels, hamsters, guinea pigs, gerbils, chipmunks, rabbits, and hares are almost never found to be infected with rabies and have not been known to cause rabies in humans in the U.S.

Domestic animals such as dogs, cats, ferrets, horses, cattle, and sheep are susceptible to rabies but cases are few because of the use of USDA-licensed rabies vaccines. North Carolina law requires owners to have dogs, cats, and ferrets vaccinated for rabies beginning at 4 months of age. Really, the vaccine is to protect you as much as your pet.

The rabies virus infects the central nervous system, causing disease in the brain and then death. Signs in animals include change in attitude, erratic behavior, disorientation, incoordination, seizures, change in tone of bark, excessive salivation, dropped jaw, inability to swallow, and fever. A person can only get rabies by coming in contact with the saliva or brain/nervous system tissue of an infected animal. Examples include being bitten by a rabid animal, handling a pet that has been attacked by a rabid animal, or cleaning a dead animal that had rabies that you killed while hunting.

The number of human deaths from rabies in the U.S. now averages only one or two cases per year. Most of these cases were from bat bites. In other parts of the world, 40,000 to 70,000 human deaths occur mostly from bites from unvaccinated dogs. A bat bite may not cause a person to wake up from a sound sleep. If you awaken and find a bat in your room or tent, it should be safely captured, animal services should be called, the bat should be tested for rabies, and you should seek medical attention. You should never handle a bat or other dead animal with your bare hands.

Any animal that is bitten or scratched by a wild, carnivorous mammal or bat that is not available for testing should be regarded as having been exposed to rabies. Unvaccinated dogs, cats, or ferrets exposed to a rabid animal should be euthanized. If an owner is unwilling to have this done, the animal should be placed in strict isolation at an animal shelter for 6 months. Animals with expired rabies vaccinations need to be evaluated by the animal shelter/ health department on a case by case basis. Dogs and cats that are currently vaccinated are kept under observation for a minimum of 10 days (time to be determined by the animal shelter/health department).

An exposure to rabies is an urgent situation. Once symptoms appear in humans, it is usually too late to start treatment and the disease is almost always fatal. Be a responsible pet owner and have your dog, cat, or ferret vaccinated for rabies and boosted as recommended by your veterinarian.