

Whatcom County Health Department Rabies Fact Sheet
(Revised April 2007)

Q: What is rabies?

A: Rabies is a viral infection that affects the central nervous system. It is fatal if rabies vaccine and immune globulin are not received before symptoms appear. Only a handful of people have survived after symptoms appeared. They required intense medical treatment and many suffer from permanent brain damage.

Q: Who can get rabies?

A: All mammals can get rabies, including humans. An animal that has been infected with rabies virus is considered rabid.

Q: What animals carry rabies?

A: In the Pacific Northwest bats are the only reservoir of rabies. Pets that have contact with rabid bats can become rabid. Rabies has been found in skunks, raccoons, foxes and coyotes in the United States. In developing countries dogs are a common carrier of rabies.

Q: How is rabies spread?

A: The rabies virus is found in the saliva, brain and spinal tissue of the rabid animal. It is usually spread to humans through bites. Rabies can also be spread when the virus is exposed to mucous membranes (eye, nose, mouth), open cuts or wounds, and abraded skin.

Q: What should I do if an animal bites me?

A: Clean the wound with soap and water. Contact your doctor for wound treatment and to make sure your tetanus booster is up-to-date. Report the bite to animal control if bitten by a dog, cat or ferret. Animal control will arrange to quarantine the animal to make sure that it is not rabid. Contact the Whatcom County Health Department if you have contact with a bat or wild animal.

Q: What if I wake up with a bat in my house?

A: If you find a bat in your house, isolate the bat in a room if possible and call the Health Department immediately. We will assess if there has been a possible exposure and if the bat needs to be tested for rabies. **Live bats CANNOT be brought into the Health Department.** If it is determined that the bat needs to be tested, you will need to visit a veterinarian to have the animal euthanized and then bring the dead bat to the Health Department.

Q: What are the symptoms of rabies in humans?

A: Early symptoms may include headache, fever, and sometimes pain at the site of exposure (bite). The disease rapidly progresses as it attacks the nervous system causing agitation, confusion, paralysis, difficulty swallowing and a fear of water. Most patients die within a few days or weeks once symptoms appear.

Q: How soon do signs and symptoms appear?

A: Symptoms usually develop within 2-8 weeks after contact with a rabid animal, but it may take a year or more.

Q: What is the treatment for rabies?

A: Once signs and symptoms appear there is no treatment so it very important to seek advice and medical care as soon as possible after exposure. If a potential rabies exposure occurred, you will receive one shot of rabies immune globulin which gives you immediate protection from the virus. You will also receive five doses of human diploid cell rabies vaccine given in the arm on days 0, 3, 7, 14 and 28 after exposure.

Q: Have humans been infected with rabies in Washington?

A: Yes. There was a fatal case in 1995 and a second case in 1997. Both were due to contact with bats. These were the first reported cases in the state since 1939.

Q: How can I reduce the risk of exposure to a rabid animal?

A: *Do not handle wild animals, especially bats!* Teach your children never to touch or handle bats, even dead ones. Have your child tell an adult if they find a bat at home, at school, or with a pet.

Make sure that your pets are up-to-date on rabies vaccinations. Unvaccinated pets are at a higher risk for rabies. Call animal control or your veterinarian if a pet has had contact with a bat.

Prevent bats from entering your home by making sure that windows and doors are screened. Do not leave unscreened windows and doors open at dusk when bats feed.

Q: What if I am traveling to a developing country? How can I avoid rabies?

A: Pre-exposure vaccination is recommended for travelers planning to be more than 30 days in an area of the world where rabies is a constant threat. Contact your physician for information.

Pre-exposure vaccination is also recommended for any person whose occupation involves frequent risk of rabies exposure. In Washington this includes anyone who handles bats, veterinarians, employees in veterinary clinics and laboratory workers where rabies specimens are handled.

Whatcom County Health Department

Disease Response & Control

Phone: (360) 676-6724

Fax: (360) 676-7646