

Rabies

Fact Sheet

What is rabies?

Rabies is caused by a virus that affects the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord) of warm-blooded mammals, including humans. Once symptoms appear, it is almost always fatal.

How do people get rabies?

People are usually exposed to rabies from the bite of an infected animal. In rare cases, people are infected by non-bite exposures. All bites represent a possible risk of rabies.

Scratches, abrasions, open wounds or mucus membranes (i.e., eyes, nose, and mouth) that come in contact with saliva or material from an infected animal are considered non-bite exposures. Non-bite exposures rarely cause rabies.

What is the incubation period in humans?

The time between exposure to the virus and the onset of symptoms can range from approximately three to eight weeks, but can be as short as nine days or as long as seven years. This time frame depends on factors such as the severity of the wound, the location of the bite and how susceptible the person is to infection.

What are the signs and symptoms in humans?

In humans, rabies usually begins with fever, cough, or sore throat and is followed in several days by more serious symptoms such as hallucinations and seizures.

What medical attention do I need if I am exposed?

If you are bitten by an animal or suffer a non-bite exposure, you should wash the area with soap and water immediately. This can greatly reduce the chance of infection. Contact your doctor or Public Health immediately as they can help determine your risk of exposure to rabies. Vaccinations will be given promptly if the risk of exposure is high.

Who is at risk?

Human rabies cases are very rare in Canada. You may be at risk if you are travelling outside of Canada.

People travelling to countries where the disease is common are at greater risk. Rabies is found on all continents except Antarctica. In certain parts of the world rabies is so common in dogs that it is always considered to be present.

How can I protect myself?

Travellers with unprotected outdoor exposure while biking, camping and hiking in rural areas are at greatest risk. Lab workers, veterinarians, animal control workers, spelunkers, forest rangers, and researchers are high risk.

Do not approach or pet stray dogs or cats, or any wild animal. Anyone who plans to stay more than 30 days in remote or rural areas of affected countries should consider being vaccinated.

Other Questions?

Talk to your health care provider or call our Communicable Disease Program at 613-966-5500 x349. Toll Free 1-800-267-2803 | TTY Dial 711 (1-800-267-6511) | www.hpepublichealth.ca

References

- Kingston Frontenac Lennox & Addington Health Unit, Rabies Vaccine for Travellers, September 2008.
- Ministry of Health & Long-Term Care, Rabies, May 2004.

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