



NEWS

MONTGOMERY COUNTY OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS
COURT HOUSE, NORRISTOWN, PA., BOX 311, 19404-0311

Frank X. Custer, Communications Director

Jessica Willingham, Communications Assistant

PHONE (610) 278-3061 FAX (610) 278-5943

COMMISSIONERS: JOSH SHAPIRO, *Chair*

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Rabies Facts from the Montgomery County Health Department
Leonard Olu Williams, MPH, CHES, Public Health Information Analyst

Norristown, PA (July 1, 2015) – Rabies is a preventable viral disease of mammals most often transmitted through the bite of a rabid animal.

How is rabies transmitted? All species of mammals are susceptible to rabies virus infection, but only a few species are important as reservoirs for the disease. In the United States, distinct strains of rabies virus have been identified in raccoons, skunks, foxes, and coyotes, and several species of insectivorous bats. Transmission of rabies virus usually begins when infected saliva of a host is passed to an uninfected animal. The most common mode of rabies virus transmission is through the bite and virus-containing saliva of an infected host.

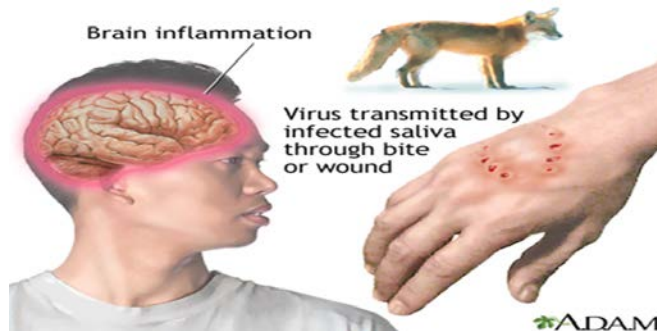


Photo Credit: National Institutes of Health, U.S. National Library of Medicine

What are the signs of rabies in animals? Signs of the disease may include fearfulness, aggression, salivating, difficulty swallowing, staggering, and seizures. Rabid wild animals may also display unusual behavior; for example, nocturnal animals may be seen wandering in the daytime. Animals may also exhibit depression, self-mutilation, or increased sensitivity to light.

What are the signs and symptoms of rabies in humans? The first symptoms of rabies resemble those of the flu and may last for days. These symptoms include general weakness or discomfort, fever, or headache. There may also be discomfort or a prickling or itching sensation at the site of the bite, progressing within days to symptoms of cerebral dysfunction, anxiety, confusion, and/or agitation. As the disease progresses, the infected person may experience abnormal behavior, delirium, hallucinations, and insomnia. The *acute period* of rabies typically ends after two to 10 days. Once clinical signs of rabies appear, the disease is nearly always fatal, and treatment is typically supportive.

When should I seek medical attention? Decisions should not be delayed. Wash any wounds immediately. One of the most effective ways to decrease the chance for infection is to wash the wound thoroughly with soap and water. See your doctor for attention for any trauma due to an animal attack before considering the need for rabies vaccination. The treatment for someone who has been exposed to rabies is a series of shots known as post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP). These shots help the body's immune system destroy the disease in its early stages. Getting PEP before symptoms appear usually prevents infection, and people are likely to recover.

What is the risk for my pet? Any animal bitten or scratched by wild, carnivorous mammal or a bat that is not available for testing should be regarded as having been exposed to rabies. Unvaccinated dogs, cats, and ferrets exposed to a rabid animal should be euthanized immediately. If the owner is unwilling to have this done, the animal should be placed in strict isolation for six months and vaccinated one month before being released. Animals with expired vaccinations need to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Dogs and cats that are currently vaccinated are kept under observation for 45 days.

Small mammals such as squirrels, rats, mice, 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 among humans in the United States. Bites by these animals are usually not considered a risk of rabies unless the animal was sick or behaving in any unusual manner and rabies is widespread in your area.

What is MCHD doing about rabies? The Montgomery County Health Department (MCHD) has a Rabies Control Program that is exercised by the Division of Communicable Disease Control and Prevention. The divisional staff monitors human and animal (wild and domesticated) rabies, investigates animal bites, recommends rabies post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) if appropriate, and initiates recommended animal control and rabies prevention measures. MCHD also organizes low cost rabies immunization clinics annually during the month of June. These clinics are held at various locations in Montgomery County in order to ensure that residents have an opportunity to get their cats, dogs, and ferrets the protection they need against rabies. Finally, rabies education presentations

are provided to animal health facilities, law enforcement agencies, and other community partners by request; this is done in addition to the rabies information that is provided via phone during animal bite investigations and/or animal health inquiries.

Where can I get more information on rabies?

- <http://www.cdc.gov/rabies/>
- [PA Department of Agriculture – Rabies Facts](#)