
What should I do if an animal bites me?

If an animal bites you, there are a few simple steps you can take:

- * Wash the wound with **lots** of soap and running water.
- * Go to a physician or emergency room immediately if the bite is severe or bleeding.
- * In any case, notify your physician/healthcare provider, than an animal bit you.
- * Make sure that you are up to date on your tetanus vaccination.
- * If possible and without causing further injury, try to identify or capture the biting animal.
- * Notify your local health department of animal control agency. The animal may need to be tested or quarantined.



Domestic pets causes most animal bites. Dogs are more likely to bite than cats are. Cat bites, however, are more likely to cause infection. Bites from non-immunized domestic animals and wild animals carry the risk of rabies. Indiana animals considered to be at highest risk of transmitting rabies to humans include bats, skunks, foxes, raccoons, and coyotes. Bats are the most common animal in Indiana reported to have rabies. **Reptiles and birds never get rabies.** *Rabbits, Squirrels and other rodents rarely carry rabies.* Theoretically, rabbits, rats, mice, squirrels, chipmunks, and other small mammals can transmit rabies, but bites from these animals are not considered a rabies risk in Indiana at this time.

About Rabies



BATS are flying mammals

Rabies is a viral disease that infects the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord) of mammals, including humans. It is almost always fatal.

It is usually transmitted by the bite of a rabid animal. Rabies virus usually produces behavioral changes in animals that make them more likely to bite. This helps transmit the virus to another animal. Rabies can also be transmitted when infected saliva comes in contact with an open wound, the eyes, or the mouth. A scratch from a rabid animal could transmit the disease because there might be virus on its claws.

Symptoms of rabies—One of the first signs of rabies in an animal is a change in behavior. A usually calm animal becomes aggressive, or a very active animal may seem depressed. Rabid wild animals can lose their fear of humans, and nocturnal animals might be seen during daylight hours.

In addition to different behavior, rabid animals can become aggressive and may attack other animals and even inanimate objects. Some animals may become uncoordinated and weak (paralytic rabies), and they have a dull or vacant expression. Weakness eventually leads to paralysis and death. In some, rabid animals, paralysis of the muscles used for swallowing causes saliva to accumulate, which can result in drooling and foaming.

Symptoms of Rabies in humans

Rabies in humans is very similar to that in animals. The **time between the bite and the appearance of symptoms** is called the **incubation period** and it may last for weeks to months.

The first sign in humans consists of a general feeling of apprehension and itching or tingling at the site of the bite. Other signs of rabies include:

- * Headache
- * Weakness
- * Paralysis—Swallowing is often impossible due to paralysis of the throat muscles.
- * Death.

Anyone who has had an exposure to a rabid animal may be at risk for contracting rabies.

TREATMENT FOR RABIES?

Once symptoms appear in humans, **rabies cannot be cured**. Rabies is almost always fatal; there have been only a few human rabies survivors, and almost all suffered permanent, neurological damage. Therefore, efforts are focused on preventing exposure or providing immunity that will prevent disease in those exposed.

PREVENTION

You can avoid being exposed to rabies by doing the following:

- Don't attempt to pet animals unknown to you
- Don't approach animals that are sleeping, injured, eating, or caring for young
- Avoid contact with wild animals; enjoy them from a distance.
- Prevent wildlife from entering your house, garage, storage sheds or other enclosed areas
- Don't leave pet food out where it will attract wildlife
- Keep garbage containers closed and secure



HAVE YOUR PETS VACCINATED AGAINST RABIES—a vaccinated pet is a barrier between you and rabid wildlife.

If you are exposed to rabies, the disease can be prevented with appropriate immunization.

- ◆ Individuals who are in high-risk occupations (veterinarians, wildlife workers, rehabilitators, animal control personnel, and rabies laboratory workers) should be immunized with rabies vaccine prior to exposure.
- ◆ Rabies can also be prevented by vaccination after an exposure has occurred but before symptoms develop. When given properly, post-exposure prophylaxis has been extremely effective in preventing rabies in humans bitten by known or suspected rabid animals.



TREATING AN ANIMAL BITE OR SCRATCH

If an animal bites or scratches you, follow these guidelines:

- **For MINOR WOUNDS**—If the bite/scratch barely breaks the skin and there is no danger of rabies, treat it as a minor wound. Wash the wound thoroughly with soap and water. Apply an antibiotic cream (i.e. *Neosporin* or *Triple Antibiotic Ointment*) to prevent infection and cover the wound with a clean bandage.
- **For DEEP WOUNDS**—If the animal bite/scratch creates a deep puncture of the skin or if the skin is badly torn and bleeding, apply pressure with a clean, dry cloth to stop the bleeding and see your healthcare provider.
- **For INFECTION**—If you have signs of infection, such as swelling, redness, increased pain or oozing, seek healthcare immediately.
- **For SUSPECTED RABIES**—If the bite was caused by an animal that might carry rabies—including any wild or domestic animal of unknown immunization status—see your healthcare provider *immediately*.

Doctors recommend getting a tetanus shot every 10 years. If your last one was more than five years ago and your wound is deep or dirty, you should have a booster as soon as possible after the injury.

Adapted from Indiana State Department of Health, *Epidemiology Resource Center, Quick Facts...About Rabies*.

Revised: March 2011



Animal Bites



Quick Facts and First Aid

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