

May 2004

## RABIES FACT SHEET

### What is rabies?

Rabies is a preventable viral disease of mammals most often transmitted through the bite of a rabid animal. The vast majority of rabies cases each year occur in wild animals like raccoons, skunks, bats, and foxes. Domestic animals account for less than 10% of the reported rabies cases, with cats, cattle, and dogs most often reported rabid.

### How do people get rabies?

People usually get rabies from the bite of a rabid animal. It is also possible, but quite rare, that people may get rabies if infectious material from a rabid animal, such as saliva, gets directly into their eyes, nose, mouth, or a wound. Inhalation of aerosolized rabies virus is also a potential non-bite route of exposure, but other than laboratory workers, most people are unlikely to encounter an aerosol of rabies virus. Other contact, such as petting a rabid animal or contact with the blood, urine or feces (e.g., guano) of a rabid animal, does not constitute an exposure and is not an indication for prophylaxis.

### What are the symptoms of rabies?

Rabies virus infects the central nervous system, causing encephalopathy and ultimately death. Rabies is 100% fatal if prophylaxis is not started in time. Early symptoms of rabies in humans are nonspecific, consisting of fever, headache, and general malaise. As the disease progresses, neurological symptoms appear and may include insomnia, anxiety, confusion, slight or partial paralysis, excitation, hallucinations, agitation, hypersalivation, difficulty swallowing, and hydrophobia (fear of water). Death usually occurs within days of the onset of symptoms.

### How soon after an exposure should I seek medical attention?

Medical assistance should be obtained as soon as possible after an exposure. There have been no vaccine failures in the United States (i.e., someone developed rabies) when postexposure prophylaxis (PEP) was given promptly and appropriately after an exposure.

### What medical attention do I need if I am exposed to rabies?

One of the most effective methods to decrease the chances for infection involves thorough washing of the wound with soap and water. Specific medical attention for someone exposed to rabies is called postexposure prophylaxis or PEP. In the United States, postexposure prophylaxis consists of a regimen of one dose of immune globulin and five doses of rabies vaccine over a 28-day period. Rabies immune globulin and the first dose of rabies vaccine should be given by your health care provider as soon as possible after exposure. Additional doses of rabies vaccine should be given on days 3, 7, 14, and 28 after the first vaccination. Current vaccines are relatively painless and are given in your arm, like a flu or tetanus vaccine.

### **Will the rabies vaccine make me sick?**

Adverse reactions to rabies vaccine and immune globulin are not common. Newer vaccines in use today cause fewer adverse reactions than previously available vaccines. Mild, local reactions to the rabies vaccine, such as pain, redness, swelling, or itching at the injection site, have been reported. Rarely, symptoms such as headache, nausea, abdominal pain, muscle aches, and dizziness have been reported. Local pain and low-grade fever may follow injection of rabies immune globulin.

### **How can I protect my pet from rabies?**

There are several things you can do to protect your pet from rabies. First, visit your veterinarian with your pet on a regular basis and keep rabies vaccinations up-to-date for all cats, ferrets, and dogs. Second, maintain control of your pets by keeping cats and ferrets indoors and keeping dogs under direct supervision. Third, spay or neuter your pets to help reduce the number of unwanted pets that may not be properly cared for or vaccinated regularly. Lastly, call animal control to remove all stray animals from your neighborhood since these animals may be unvaccinated or ill.

### **Why does my pet need the rabies vaccine?**

Although the majority of rabies cases occur in wildlife, most humans are given rabies vaccine as a result of exposure to domestic animals. This explains the tremendous cost of rabies prevention in domestic animals in the United States. While wildlife are more likely to be rabid than are domestic animals in the United States, the amount of human contact with domestic animals greatly exceeds the amount of contact with wildlife. Your pets and other domestic animals can be infected when they are bitten by rabid wild animals. When "spillover" rabies occurs in domestic animals, the risk to humans is increased. Pets are therefore vaccinated by your veterinarian to prevent them from acquiring the disease from wildlife, and thereby transmitting it to humans.

### **What happens if a neighborhood cat bites me?**

You should seek medical evaluation for any animal bite and report the bite to your local city or county animal control officer or sheriff. Rabies is uncommon in dogs, cats, and ferrets in the United States and very few bites by these animals carry a risk of rabies. If the cat (or dog or ferret) appeared healthy at the time you were bitten, it can be quarantined for 10 days and observed at a place designated by the animal control officer. No anti-rabies prophylaxis is needed. No person in the United States has ever contracted rabies from a dog, cat or ferret held in quarantine for 10 days. If a dog, cat, or ferret appeared ill at the time it bit you or becomes ill during the 10 day quarantine, it should be evaluated by a veterinarian for signs of rabies and you should seek medical advice about the need for anti-rabies prophylaxis.

## **Bats and Rabies**

### **Do bats get rabies?**

Yes. Bats are mammals and are susceptible to rabies, but most do not have the disease. You cannot tell if a bat has rabies just by looking at it; rabies can be confirmed only by having the animal tested in a laboratory. To minimize the risk for rabies, it is best never to handle any bat.

### **What should I do if I come in contact with a bat?**

If you are bitten by a bat -- or if infectious material (such as saliva) from a bat gets into your eyes, nose, mouth, or a wound -- wash the affected area thoroughly and get medical attention immediately. Whenever possible, the bat should be captured and sent to a laboratory for rabies testing.

People usually know when a bat has bitten them. However, because bats have small teeth that may leave marks that are not easily seen, there are situations in which you should seek medical advice even in the absence of an obvious bite wound. For example, if you awaken and find a bat in your room, see a bat in the room of an unattended child, or see a bat near a mentally impaired or intoxicated person, seek medical advice and call your local animal control to have the bat captured and tested. Do not let the bat go.

People cannot get rabies just from seeing a bat in an attic, in a cave, or at a distance. In addition, people cannot get rabies from having contact with bat guano (feces), blood, or urine, or from touching a bat on its fur (even though bats should never be handled!).

### **What should I do if I find a bat in my home?**

If you see a bat in your home and you are sure no human or pet exposure has occurred, confine the bat to a room by closing all doors and windows leading out of the room except those to the outside. The bat will probably leave soon. If not, it can be caught, as described below, and released outdoors away from people and pets.

However, if there is any question of exposure, leave the bat alone and call animal control or a wildlife conservation agency for assistance. If professional assistance is unavailable, use precautions to capture the bat safely, as described below.

What you will need:

- leather work gloves (put them on)
- small box or coffee can
- piece of cardboard
- tape

When the bat lands, approach it slowly and place a box or coffee can over it. Slide the cardboard under the container to trap the bat inside. Tape the cardboard to the container securely. Contact your animal control authority to make arrangements for rabies testing.

### **How can I tell if a bat has rabies?**

Rabies can be confirmed only in a laboratory. However, any bat that is active by day, is found in a place where bats are not usually seen (for example in rooms in your home or on the lawn), or is unable to fly, is far more likely than others to be rabid. Such bats are often the most easily approached. Therefore, it is best never to handle any bat.