

# Rabies

## Immunization Information



Saskatchewan  
Ministry of  
Health

### What is rabies?

- Rabies is a disease of the nervous system caused by a virus.
- Rabies is a disease of warm-blooded animals, most commonly foxes, skunks, bats, cattle, dogs and cats.

### How is rabies spread?

- Exposure to rabies is considered to have occurred when:
  - an infected animal's teeth penetrate the skin as in a bite;
  - the saliva or other potentially infectious material (brain tissue) of an infected animal comes into contact with scratches, abrasions, cuts or mucous membranes of an individual.
- The incubation period for rabies varies in different species.

### What are the signs and symptoms of rabies?

- Rabies is an acute illness that progresses from anxiety, difficulty swallowing, seizures, to eventual death, typically within a very short period of time.
- Without treatment, rabies invariably causes death.

### How can rabies be prevented?

- Have your pets vaccinated regularly.
- Keep your pets on a leash.
- Don't go near stray animals.
- Warn children to stay away from any wild animals or animals that are not known to you.

- Report unusual animal behaviour to a veterinarian. See your doctor and call public health if an animal has bitten you.
- A series of three doses of rabies vaccine should be given pre-exposure to persons who work in high-risk occupations (i.e. veterinarians), travellers spending more than 30 days in an area where rabies is a threat or those travellers who will be staying in an area more than 24 hours away from medical facilities.

### When should you be concerned about rabies?

- When an animal bites a person or another animal for no reason.
- When the bite is severe and the skin is broken.
- If the animal cannot be confined and put under observation.
- When you find a bat in a room where someone has been sleeping.

### What should you do if you suspect someone has been exposed to rabies?

- Flush the wound immediately with lots of soap and water.
- Confine the animal and place it under observation if possible.
- Seek medical attention as soon as possible.
- Report the incident immediately to the Medical Health Officer within your health region for recommendations. If you plan to destroy the animal, do so without damaging the head so testing for rabies can be done.

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## How can you tell if an animal has rabies?

- An animal may not have any apparent symptoms initially. However, you can be suspicious if an animal:
  - behaves in an unusually tame or unusually aggressive manner;
  - becomes restless and excitable and attacks a person or another animal without reason;
  - appears to have difficulty swallowing or has weakness in the limbs;
  - has a decrease in appetite or refuses to eat.

## What is the treatment for rabies after an exposure?

- The level of risk will be determined by your physician and the medical health officer following an investigation of the incident.
- When indicated, rabies vaccine should be started as soon as possible after the exposure. Once symptoms develop, there is no treatment as most cases are fatal.
- If no previous immunization with rabies vaccine, the full course includes rabies immune globulin (RIG) and a series of five doses of vaccine over a 28-day period. Rabies immune globulin should be administered with the first dose of rabies vaccine but at a separate site.
- For those who have received rabies vaccine previously, 2 doses of vaccine are required.

## What do rabies immune globulin and rabies vaccine contain?

- Rabies immune globulin is a sterile solution of antibodies that provides individuals with immediate short-term protection against rabies. It is stabilized with glycerine and is heat-treated to inactivate viruses to further reduce the risk of transmission of blood-borne viruses. It is prepared from pooled human plasma from persons who have been immunized.
- The rabies vaccine is comprised of a sterile, stable, freeze-dried suspension of inactivated rabies virus and human albumin, neomycin and phenol red indicator. The rabies virus is harvested from infected human diploid cells.
- The vaccine contains neither preservative nor stabilizer. The human albumin is heat-treated to inactivate viruses and to further reduce the risk of transmission of blood-borne viruses.

## What are the possible reactions to rabies vaccination and immune globulin?

- Redness, soreness, itchiness and swelling at the site of injections.
- Mild systemic reactions such as headache, nausea, abdominal pain, muscle aches and dizziness. Serious reactions are very rare.
- Local pain and low-grade fever can follow rabies immune globulin.

## What are the precautions for and contraindications of rabies vaccine?

- Persons who have experienced a severe allergic reaction to previous rabies vaccine doses should be vaccinated only under strict medical supervision.
- Following significant exposure to a proven rabid animal, there is no contraindication that supersedes the need for rabies vaccine.
- If you have questions or concerns, talk with your doctor or a public health official.

*Your immunization information will be recorded in a computerized system known as the Saskatchewan Immunization Management System (SIMS).*

*Information collected in SIMS may be used to:*

- *manage immunization records*
- *notify you if you or your child needs an immunization*
- *monitor how well vaccines work in preventing vaccine preventable diseases*

*Your immunization records may also be shared with health care professionals in order to provide public health services; assist with diagnosis and treatment; and to control the spread of vaccine preventable diseases.*

**For more information, contact:  
your local public health office,  
OR your physician,  
OR HealthLine at 1-877-800-0002.**