



BUCKS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH  
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## Questions & Answers on Rabies

### Q: What is rabies?

A: Rabies is a deadly disease caused by a virus that attacks the nervous system.

### Q: What animals may be affected by rabies?

A: All mammals can be affected by the rabies virus, but it occurs most often among wildlife species, such as bats, raccoons, skunks and foxes. Unvaccinated dogs, cats and livestock also may get rabies. Rabbits, squirrels, opossums, rats, mice, guinea pigs, gerbils, hamsters, chipmunks, and muskrats almost never get rabies.

### Q: Do birds or snakes get rabies?

A: No. Birds, fish, snakes, turtles, lizards and insects do not get rabies.

### Q: How do people become exposed to rabies?

A: Since the rabies virus lives in the saliva of the rabid animals, a bite is the most common way the disease is spread. People may also become exposed to rabies by being scratched by a rabid animal or when the saliva gets into open wounds in the skin or in the eyes, nose or mouth.

### Q: Can I get rabies just by touching or petting a rabid animal if I wasn't scratched or bitten?

A: There is no danger from touching or petting a rabid animal unless saliva from that animal gets into an open wound, or your eyes, nose or mouth. If this happens, you should see your doctor immediately.

### Q: Can I get rabies by being near a rabid animal or where the rabid animal has just been? For example, a bat in a room, a raccoon in a backyard, barn or chimney?

A: No. Exposure to rabies occurs by being scratched, bitten or by having saliva come in contact with an open wound or the eyes, nose or mouth. Just by being in the same room or in the same vicinity does not result in exposure.

**Q: Can I get rabies by handling or touching my dog or cat that has just been in a fight with a raccoon?**

A: If you do not handles, pet, touch or examine your dog or cat within 2 hours following the fight, there is no danger of getting rabies. If you handle your pet within 2 hours of a fight, be sure to thoroughly wash your hands with soap and water. Then contact your doctor or the Bucks County Department of Health for advice.

**Q: What are the symptoms of rabies in an animal?**

A: Symptoms of rabies may vary widely from animal to animal. In any animal, the first sign of rabies is usually a change in behavior. The animal becomes either unnaturally withdrawn or unnaturally approachable. In the furious form, the animal is excited, aggressive, irritable and may snap at anything in its path. It loses all caution and fear of natural enemies. If the animal has the dumb form of the disease, it may appear unusually tame, affectionate and friendly. Staggering, convulsions, frothing at the mouth and gradual paralysis are sometimes noticed. Many animals have a change in the sound of their voice.

**Q: What should I do if I think my dog, cat or farm animal has rabies?**

A: Consult a veterinarian and report to the Bucks County Department of Health if any person has been bitten or exposed to the suspect animal. Be sure to keep the animal confined until it can be examined by the veterinarian. Try not to expose yourself or other people.

**Q: What should I do if I see a stray dog, cat or wild animal that I think may have rabies?**

A: Do not feed, pet or handle it. Keep your own animal from coming in contact with it. Capture the animal, if possible, without risking exposure. For example, if the raccoon is in a garage, close all doors and windows. Then call your local animal control agency or wildlife pest control agent for further instructions.

**Q: What should I do if I find a dead animal on my property?**

A: If there has been human or animal exposure, contact the Bucks County Department of Health for instructions. If there has been no human or animal exposure, the animal may be buried. Gloves should be worn if it necessary to touch the animal. An easy way to handle the animal is to stick your hand into a garbage bag, grab the animal by the leg through the garbage bag, then pull the bag over the animal and tie it shut. Then, bury the animal, preferably three feet

deep, or dispose of it through the local animal control agency. Do not throw it out along a road, in the woods or fields.

**Q: How can I protect my dog or cat against the threat of rabies?**

A: All dogs and cats should be vaccinated against rabies by a veterinarian. Pennsylvania law requires dogs and house cats over 3 months of age to be vaccinated against rabies by a veterinarian. Dogs and cats should be confined to your home or yard and walked on a leash to decrease their chance of exposure to rabid animals. In certain localities, dogs are required by law to be controlled on a leash whenever off the owner's property.

**Q: How long are rabies shots (vaccinations) for my dog or cat good?**

A: For dogs or cats, less than 1 year of age, the shot is only good for one year. For one year of age or older, the vaccinations are effective for one or three years, depending on the vaccine used. The rabies certificate should give the expiration date of your dog or cat's shot.

**Q: What is the earliest age I can have my dog or cat vaccinated against rabies?**

A: Three months of age.

**Q: Will it hurt to vaccinate my dog or cat more often than required, such as every year, even though the rabies vaccination is good for three years?**

A: Although not necessary, it will not harm your animal.

**Q: What other animals can be vaccinated against rabies?**

A: There is no rabies vaccines approved for any wildlife species, such as raccoons, skunks, foxes and ferrets. Your veterinarian has vaccines that are approved for horses, cows, sheep and goats.

**Q: What should I do if my dog, cat or farm animal has been exposed to a wild animal that I think might have rabies?**

A: The wild animal should be captured or killed being careful not to damage the head and submitted for rabies testing through the local health department. In doing this, you should be careful not to get bitten or exposed to the wild animal. Assistance may be available through your local animal control agency.

**Q: If the wild animal is positive for rabies, what should I do with my dog, cat or farm animal?**

A: If a dog, cat or farm animal has a current rabies vaccination, that animal must be revaccinated by a veterinarian and confined for 90 days. If the animal has no rabies vaccination or if the vaccination is not up-to-date, you must either destroy your dog, cat or farm animal, or hold it in strict isolation for six months in a manner approved by the Bucks County Department of Health.

**Q: What should I do if I am bitten, scratched or exposed by an animal?**

A: If you are bitten by an animal

1. Try to capture the animal. If the animal is wild, try to capture or kill it without risking further bites. Try not to damage the animal's head.
2. Immediately wash the wound with plenty of soap and water, scrubbing the bitten area gently.
3. If the animal is a pet dog or cat, obtain the owner's name, address and telephone number. Find out if the animal has current rabies shots and write down the rabies tag number.
4. Get prompt medical attention, if necessary. Go to your family doctor or nearest hospital emergency room.
5. Report the incident to the police or the Bucks County Department of Health.

**Q: What will be done with the animal that was bite (or exposed) me to find out it has rabies?**

A: If it is a dog, cat or farm animal, it will be quarantined for 10 days, according to the order of the Bucks County Department of Health to find out if it has rabies at the time it bit you. If it is a wild animal, it will probably have to be destroyed and the head submitted for testing to the laboratory.

**Q: If I am bitten or exposed by a rabid animal, what kinds of rabies preventative treatment will I receive?**

A: When treated in time, rabies can be prevented. After a person is bitten by an animal with rabies, a doctor must be contacted immediately and anti-rabies treatment begun. Once symptoms of rabies appear, the disease almost always causes death.

The preventive vaccine consists of five doses of vaccine over a one month period, plus antiserum given at the beginning. None of the injections are given in the stomach area. No one who has received this treatment has died from

rabies. Although the treatment is safe and effective, the vaccine and antiserum is expensive. Costs are between \$1,500-\$4,000 for the average size person.

**Q: If rabies is in my neighborhood, should I get vaccinated against rabies?**

A: Generally speaking, no. The pre-exposure vaccination is only recommended for certain high risk groups. These are people who regularly handle animal and therefore may be at high risk exposure to rabies. High risk groups include veterinarians, animal control workers, trappers and raccoon hunters.

**Q: What can I do to reduce my chances of getting rabies?**

A: Be sure your cat and dog have up-to-date rabies vaccinations. Pennsylvania law requires dogs and house cats over 3 months of age to be vaccinated against rabies. Vaccines are available for both cats and dogs over one year of age which are effective for one or three years.

Confine your pets to your house or yard and walk them on a leash. Roaming pets are more likely to be exposed to rabies than those supervised by their owner's. In certain localities, dogs are required by law to be controlled on a leash whenever off the owner's property.

**Do not keep wild animals as pets.** Even a baby skunk or raccoon born in captivity can be a rabies carrier. Pennsylvania law prohibits the keeping of wild pets.

Make your house and yard unattractive to wild animals. Feed pets inside the house; keep garbage in tightly closed trash cans; cap chimneys; seal off any opening in attics, under porches, and in basements and outbuilding. Do not approach or handle wild animals. Almost any animals even if they appear friendly. Never try to coax a wild animal to eat from your hand.

Instruct your children never to approach or touch wild animals or pets they do not know well. Children should be told to report immediately any bite, scratch or contact with a strange or wild animal. Stray cats are considered wild animals and should never be handled.

**Q: How long does the rabies virus live?**

A: Outside of the animal's body, the rabies virus doesn't live very long. Sunlight rapidly destroys the virus.

Inside of a dead animal's body, the rabies virus may live longer, depending on how far decomposed the animal's body is. Generally, a dead animal will decompose quicker in hot weather, than in cold weather.

**THESE SIX ANIMALS ARE CONSIDERED HIGH RISK CARRIERS  
OF RABIES**



**FOXES**



**BATS**



**SKUNKS**



**STRAY CATS**



**RACCOONS**



**COYOTES**

**AVOID PHYSICAL CONTACT WITH ALL WILD ANIMALS**

**FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT**

**BUCKS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH**



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