
Rabies

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A DISEASE TO BE AWARE OF AND RESPECT

Rabies. It is the first animal disease we learn about as children, and the one we dread most as adults. But how much do we really know about it?

Rabies disease is caused by a virus that is usually found in a particular species in a given area. For example, in the Southwest rabies is carried by, and found in, bats and foxes, and to a lesser degree in skunks and raccoons. Other species, like our



Rabies is an acute viral infection transmitted to humans by a bite or by the exposure of broken skin to an infected animal's saliva. Immunization given early (preferably within 24 hours but certainly within 72 hours) can usually prevent the disease.

coyotes, dogs, cats, horses, etc., contract rabies when they come in contact with the saliva of one of those carrier species. The most common source of rabies in humans in the U.S. is infected pets, with surprisingly cats (not dogs) being at the top of the list. Our pets are potentially exposed to rabies whenever they come in contact with wildlife, especially if that wildlife is one of the rabies

carrier species (bat, fox, skunk, raccoon), although non-carrier species, such as coyotes, bobcats, or javelina can also pass the rabies virus on to our pets (or us) through bite wounds if they themselves are infected by a carrier species.



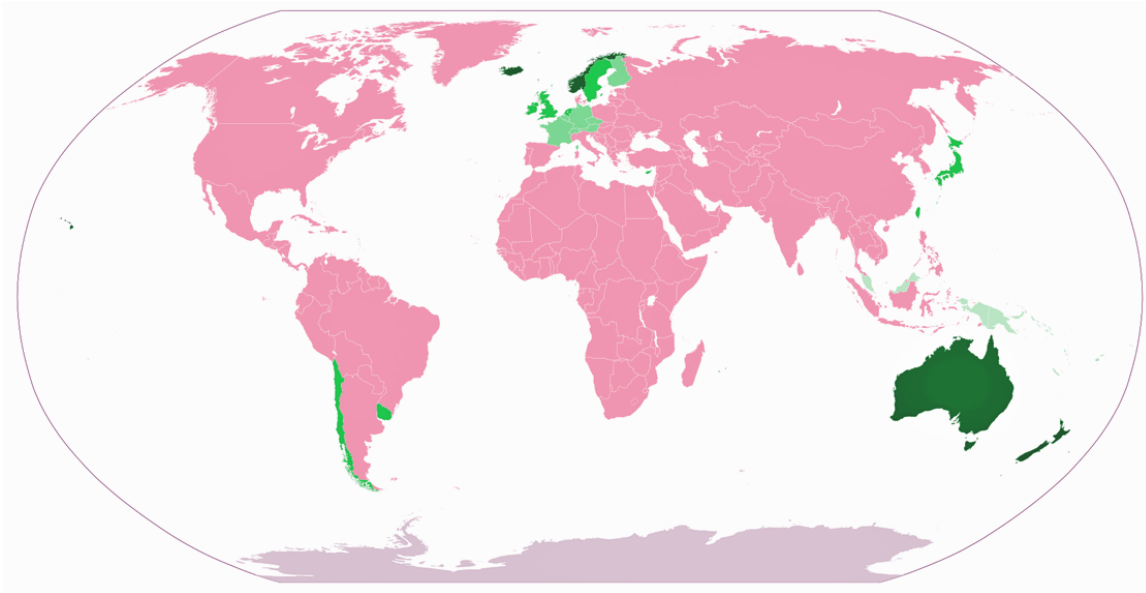
So what would you expect to see in a rabid animal? Because rabies is a disease that affects the nervous system, the first sign you generally see is a change in behavior. In wildlife this often manifests itself as a lack of fear which had been there before—nocturnal animals may be seen during the day, or normally skittish animals will not run off when threatened. We can see similar behavior changes in our pets, ranging from the “mad-dog” syndrome where the animal becomes progressively more aggressive, to the “dum” form where they are not aggressive but seem to have problems swallowing, and may hypersalivate, or have a dropped jaw. Both forms progress through seizures and ultimately to complete paralysis and death. This is not a pretty disease. Animals that are exposed via bite wounds from an infected animal may not show signs immediately, with the average time between bite and symptoms being approximately 21 to 80 days. This time frame can be quite variable, which can make diagnosis difficult. Surprisingly, in general, rabies can be a difficult disease to diagnose in our pets. In its early stages it can look very similar to neurological or behavioral problems that are seen much more commonly in our pet populations. And, unfortunately, the only reliable test for rabies, besides recognizing the progression of the disease, is done on brain tissue, so an animal would need to be put to sleep to confirm a rabies diagnosis.

So what do we do against such a disease? Vaccinate! Once the rabies virus is contacted and signs are beginning to show, this disease is fatal, and the chance of humans being infected increases greatly. Vaccines have proven to be very effective in protecting our pets and are available for dogs, cats, horses, etc. Vaccinated pets that are exposed to potentially rabid wildlife or other animals should be revaccinated immediately and monitored; unvaccinated pets need to go through a strict six-month quarantine so as not to infect others, or, if the risk of exposure is high and they are exhibiting signs, to be put to sleep and tested. Rabies Animal Control has strict guidelines to follow in cases of suspected rabies.

Rabies is definitely a disease to be aware of and respect. The good news is the risk of contracting rabies is relatively low in our area when compared to other diseases we see. Our primary carrier species is the bat, not the wildlife species we come in contact with the most often, the coyote. The bad news is coyotes can become infected as easily as we can from bats, and can then pass the disease on, as can any other mammal. Our best protection is simple: vaccination and awareness.



Vaccinate your pets and minimize their fraternizing with wildlife, and the potential of a rabies outbreak will be nipped in the bud (no pun intended).



Rabies-free countries shown in shades of green.

