

RABIES

What is rabies?

Rabies is a disease caused by a virus that attacks the brain. It can affect any warm-blooded animal, including cats and humans. It is almost always fatal.

What are the signs of rabies?

There are three stages of the disease. The first is the “prodromal” phase in which there is a marked change in temperament. The quiet cat becomes agitated, and the active cat becomes nervous or shy. Other signs include dilated pupils, excessive drooling, and snapping at imaginary objects. After 2-3 days, the second phase begins. It is called the “excitatory” phase. There is an exaggerated response to any stimulus. Cats may experience bizarre changes in appetite including eating and swallowing sticks, stones, and other objects. The cat may roam aimlessly, inflict trauma upon itself, and have a change in voice. There will often be vicious, aggressive behavior, even towards its owner. Seizures may occur. Sometimes there is a third form, the “dumb” form, in which the cat becomes extremely depressed. Its mouth may gape open with the tongue protruding. A progressive paralysis sets in resulting in total body paralysis.

What happens next?

Ultimately, the cat dies. Although a few, rare cats have survived rabies, these are clearly exceptional cases.

How do I know if a cat has rabies?

There are a number of diseases which can cause some of the signs of rabies. A few conditions can be very similar. Confirmation of rabies can only be made with special tests performed on brain tissue. This requires that the cat be euthanized and its head sent to a special diagnostic laboratory.

Can I contract rabies?

Yes. But rabies is only transmitted by the bite of a rabid animal to another mammal. But even then, the virus is present in saliva of the infected animal for a limited time. However, if you are bitten by any animal of which you do not know the rabies vaccination status, you should immediately wash the wound thoroughly with soap and water. Try to establish who owns the animal and whether the pet is currently vaccinated for rabies. In any case, seek the advice of your physician. Post-exposure rabies treatment with serum or vaccine may be recommended. This is very successful when begun quickly.

What wild animals are most likely to carry rabies?

All mammals can catch rabies, but some are more susceptible than others. Foxes, skunks, and raccoons are particularly prone to rabies, and one should be very careful if any wild animal seems overly approachable or aggressive.

Should I get my cat vaccinated?

Absolutely. Rabies vaccines are very safe and very effective. Therefore, it is recommended for all cats, and, required by law in many locales. The public health concern is so significant that even totally indoor cats should be vaccinated. Vaccination for rabies is usually performed at three to four months of age, and then every one to three years (depending on the vaccine and the local laws) thereafter.