

Rabies

Rabies is a deadly disease, spread by a bite from an infected animal. If your child has been bitten or scratched by a wild or stray animal, we may recommend rabies vaccination. Rabies shots are highly effective in preventing disease. Rabies vaccination is safe and has few side effects.

What is rabies?

Rabies is a deadly disease of the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord), caused by a virus. It is passed in saliva when an animal or human is bitten or scratched by an infected animal.

Because of pet vaccination programs, human rabies is rare in the United States and other developed countries. (However, it's still an important problem in some parts of the world.)

Rabies is very dangerous; if a person gets sick from a bite from a rabid animal, the chances of death are high. That's why rabies vaccination is frequently recommended after animal bites, especially from wild animals such as bats.

! *If your child is bitten or scratched by a wild or stray animal, call your doctor for advice immediately!*

What causes rabies?

Rabies is caused by a virus that can affect many different kinds of animals. The most commonly infected animals in the United States are skunks, raccoons, foxes, and bats. Pet vaccination programs have greatly reduced the occurrence of rabies in dogs and cats. However, these kinds of animals may still be infected with rabies, especially if they are strays.

What does it look like?

Fortunately, human rabies is rare in the United States. When rabies does occur, it causes symptoms such as:

- Behavior changes or hallucinations.
- Spasms in the throat that make it very difficult to drink.
- Fear of water (hydrophobia).
- Possible paralysis of one or more limbs.

By the time any of these symptoms develop, the chances of death are high. Animals with rabies develop similar symptoms. If your child has been bitten by an animal, your doctor may ask how the animal was behaving. The average time from a bite or scratch to developing rabies is 4 to 6 weeks. However, the time can be as short as 5 days or as long as several months.

What puts your child at risk of rabies?

- Being bitten or scratched by an infected animal. Warn your children never to approach wild or stray animals.
- Traveling to certain foreign countries and exploring or playing around caves may increase the risk of being bitten or scratched by an infected animal.
- Contact with bats may cause rabies, even if your child is not bitten or scratched.

Can rabies be prevented?

- Make sure that all house pets receive all required rabies vaccinations. This includes not only dogs but also cats, ferrets, and other mammals.
- Make sure your child knows never to play with wild or stray dogs or cats. Rabies is more likely to spread from stray cats than from stray dogs.
- *If your child has been bitten or scratched by an infected animal, vaccination can prevent rabies from occurring.*

How is rabies treated?

Once rabies develops, the person who gets it is at high risk of death. That's why it's so important to get immediate medical care if your child has been bitten or scratched by an unknown animal.

Bite care. Any time your child is bitten by an animal, clean the area of the bite thoroughly.

- Scrub the area with soap and water.
- Rinse the area for at least 10 minutes. This may include rinsing with an antiseptic solution, such as Betadine (generic name: povidone-iodine).

Assessing rabies risk. Many factors affect your child's risk of developing rabies after a bite, including the type of animal, how it was behaving, and the rabies risk in your community.

- Tell your doctor as much as you can about the bite, including the animal's behavior.
- If the animal was acting strangely or very aggressively, there is a higher chance that it was infected with rabies.
- If the animal was a pet dog or cat that has been vaccinated, your child will not be at risk of rabies.
- If the animal was a stray dog or cat and it was captured, its behavior can be observed to tell whether it has rabies. If the animal was not captured, your doctor may recommend rabies vaccinations for your child, just to be safe.


This may depend on how often rabies is found in your area; the doctor may contact your local health department before deciding.

Rabies vaccination. If your doctor has any reason to believe that your child was bitten or scratched by an animal with rabies, rabies vaccinations will be recommended. It is very important to eliminate even the smallest chance that your child will develop this deadly disease.

- Treatment with rabies vaccine and rabies immune globulin (antibodies to rabies) should be given as soon as possible after the bite.
- Your child will be given one shot of vaccine and one shot of rabies immune globulin right away. These shots are given in the area of the bite.
- Over the next several weeks, your child will need four more shots. These shots are given in the arm. It is very important that your child receive all recommended shots.

- The risk of side effects is low. Vaccination is very effective in preventing rabies after an animal bite.

When should I call your office?

Call our office *any time* your child is bitten or scratched by a wild, stray, or unknown animal or has had contact with bats. 

If your child is receiving rabies shots, call our office if any of the following occurs:

- Headache.
- Vomiting.
- Difficulty swallowing.
- Behavior changes.
- Muscle spasms.
- Fear of water.