

Rabies Quarantine

Rabies is a viral infection that causes a devastating, fatal disease. Rabies is a zoonotic infection, meaning that it can be transmitted from animals to people. If an animal or person develops the disease caused by the virus, death is assured (only a small handful of people have ever survived rabies infection).

Luckily, rabies vaccinations given before exposure to a rabid animal are extremely good at preventing infection, and rabies prophylaxis (a series of injections) given immediately after exposure to a potentially rabid animal is extremely good at preventing the fatal disease. In developed countries such as the United States, routine vaccination of pets against rabies has done an excellent job at curtailing infection in dogs and cats. In such areas, human infection with rabies is rare and usually occurs through contact with wild animals, including bats. However, in other parts of the world (e.g., parts of Africa and Asia) contact with infected dogs remains the primary means of infection for people. Even today, at least 60,000 people a year die of rabies, and more than half of these fatalities are children.

RABIES INFECTION

All warm-blooded mammals can be infected with rabies. The virus is transmitted from one animal to another through saliva, usually associated with an animal bite. Some animals are more likely to become infected than others; for instance, rodents are very seldom infected because if a rodent is bitten by a rabid animal the rodent is likely to die from the attack. On the other hand, raccoons, skunks, and foxes are more likely to become rabid, and rabies is common in bats.

Rabies enters the nerve tissue of the infected animal, and then moves from the site of the bite to the brain. This period after infection but before the onset of illness can be as short as a week or as long as many months. The length of time depends on where on the body the animal was bitten, and on the species of animal infected. Once the virus reaches the brain, it causes inflammation (encephalitis) with neurologic signs. Although most people are familiar with the stereotypical picture of a “mad dog” that becomes enraged (growling, salivating), many infected animals instead become quiet and calm. Often, these animals suffer from paralysis. Rabies should be considered in any animal that suddenly begins acting in a strange or abnormal fashion.

Animals infected with rabies virus can only transmit the infection after the virus enters the salivary glands. Usually, this occurs shortly before the animal begins to show signs of neurologic change. Once the neurologic signs begin, death is usually only weeks away.

RABIES AND PUBLIC HEALTH

A variety of local and regional laws and regulations surround issues related to rabies because the infection is such an important risk to the health of humans. These laws typically include requirements for rabies vaccination of dogs and cats. Initial vaccines are given to puppies and kittens at about 4 months of age, repeated again at one year of age, and then repeated either every 1 to 3 years thereafter for the entirety of the pet's life. Pets that have received these vaccinations are said to be “current” on their rabies vaccines, as opposed to pets that have either never been vaccinated or have fallen behind on vaccinations. Pets that are not current on rabies vaccines pose a threat to public health, and if they bite a person they are treated as a threat to human health.

Dog or cat bites can not only cause physical injury but can transmit infections including rabies virus. Every dog or cat that bites a person is subject to quarantine. The reason for quarantine is to determine if the animal that bit could have possibly transmitted rabies virus. Unless the animal causing the bite can be quarantined, rabies prophylaxis is usually recommended for the person that was bitten. Prophylaxis includes receiving a dose of immune globulin and four doses of rabies vaccine over a period of two weeks, costing the bite victim money, time, and pain. Quarantine of an animal that bit a person may allow the person to avoid this prophylaxis, and can provide the person with peace of mind.

Quarantine consists of confinement and daily observation for any signs of illness that might suggest that the animal has active rabies. Usually such quarantine is carried out in a veterinary hospital or animal shelter, but under some conditions (a well-vaccinated pet with low risk of rabies exposure) home quarantine is possible. If any signs of rabies are observed (e.g., paralysis, behavioral changes, trouble swallowing), the quarantined animal will be euthanized (humanely put to death) and the brain removed at necropsy to be submitted for rabies testing.

Local laws and regulations determine specific decisions regarding quarantine after a dog or cat bites a person. In the United States, questions in interpretation often fall to the state veterinarian, with the key responsibility of protecting human health. A variety of factors influence the decisions, including the current rabies vaccination status of the dog or cat causing the bite, the likelihood that the dog or cat has been exposed to rabies virus, and whether the dog or cat is an owned pet or is unwanted. Unwanted animals, animals deemed likely to have been exposed to a potentially rabid animal, or those that are not current on vaccinations may be euthanized and tested for rabies in place of being placed in quarantine.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

My pet is not aggressive. The bite was accidental or provoked. Does it still require quarantine?

Yes. Even accidental bites from normally well-behaved pets warrant quarantine.

Can't a veterinarian simply test my pet for rabies instead of requiring a quarantine?

Unfortunately, no. There is no reliable method of testing a living animal for rabies virus. The confirmatory test involves examination of the brain, and that requires that the animal be euthanized (humanely put to death).

How long does quarantine last?

For a vaccinated pet at low risk of rabies, quarantine is usually 10 days after the bite occurs. In some circumstances, such as when a vaccinated pet is known to have been exposed to a rabid animal, quarantine may last up to 6 months. Your veterinarian or public

health authorities will be able to answer this question given all of the specific circumstances.

Who pays for the boarding fees during quarantine?

In the vast majority of circumstances, the pet's owner is responsible for all costs associated with boarding during the period of quarantine. If the pet owner is unwilling to pay the charges, euthanasia and testing of the brain tissue may be necessary.

My pet never goes outside the house; why should it be subject to quarantine after a bite?

Even indoor-only pets can become rabid. In the United States, bats are among the animals most likely to transmit rabies virus, and bats are notorious for getting inside houses. There would likely be no way to ever know if an indoor pet had been bitten by a bat, so to err on the side of caution even indoor-only pets are treated as if they might be infected with rabies.



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