

Rabies Today

BY PHILLIP MEEKS

It's a pleasant day to be in the woods, and you're cruising a tract of timber for a neighbor when you cross paths with a small dog. He seems lost—maybe hungry and dehydrated—and you realize he looks like one you've noticed in a yard up the road. He nips your hand and runs away as you reach to check his collar for a tag, but since the bite barely breaks the skin, you just wash it with a little water from your canteen and get back to work.



Life goes on as usual until one morning three months later when you wake up with a fever and bad headache. So much time has passed since the dog bite that it's forgotten, and you're fearful you've caught the flu that's going around, but when over-the-counter medication and rest fail to help, you visit your doctor.

After a series of tests, the prognosis is horrifying. It's fatal, there's no cure; all you can do is await a painful death. Rabies.

Why You Don't Want It

Rabies is an inflammation of the brain caused by a virus, usually spread via the saliva of an infected animal. The virus can be borne in that saliva and enter a new host through an open wound or through the mucous membranes of the mouth or eyes. Once infected, the disease progresses toward the central nervous system and exhibits such symptoms as irritability, fatigue, headache, and fever. There may be itching or pain at the site of the bite.

Later symptoms may include paralysis, muscle spasms, seizures, and delirium.

While treatment immediately after exposure is highly successful, once symptoms appear it's too late,

and untreated rabies almost always results in death. One exception occurred in 2004 with a Wisconsin teenager who was placed in an induced coma and treated with several drugs after developing rabies. She survived but required much therapy, and the medical community has concluded that such an approach is a gamble at best.

It normally takes between one and three months for rabies symptoms to appear in a human after exposure to the virus, but incubation periods as high as nine years have been documented. It can be difficult to pinpoint an exact moment of infection or even determine what animal carried the disease when so much time has passed. In 2013, an organ recipient contracted rabies over a year after receiving a kidney from an infected donor.

Who Carries It?

It's estimated there were as many as 24,000 deaths in Africa and 32,000 in Asia due to this disease annually, mostly in rural villages, with 40% of victims being under 15 years of age. Domestic dogs are the primary carriers to humans on a global scale; 99% of all human cases stem from dog bites. Therefore, efforts to curb rabies by the World Health Organization and others focus on dog vaccination, as this is a relatively inexpensive course of action.

To put things in perspective, only 23 cases of human rabies were reported in the U.S. from 2008 to 2017, according to the Centers for Disease Control

and Prevention (CDC). The low number can be attributed to decades' worth of efforts to encourage the vaccination of household pets. Still, the CDC reports that 60 to 70 dogs and more than 250 cats test positive each year in this country.

But the primary carriers in the U.S. are wild animals. The CDC reports that bats accounted for 32% of rabid wildlife cases in 2017, followed by raccoons (29%), skunks (21%) and foxes (7%). The disease has also been found in deer and groundhogs, although this is uncommon.

Rabies can be categorized as the "furious form," in which unprovoked aggression is displayed by the infected animal, or the "dumb form," where the animal is uncharacteristically calm, unafraid and even friendly. Skunks, foxes, dogs and raccoons typically display the furious form of rabies, while bats often show the dumb form. The latter can be a dangerous scenario, as infected bats that lie calmly on the ground can be easily accessed by pets or curious children.

Those who spend much time in the woods—either engaged in forest management activities or hiking and hunting—obviously have a higher chance of encountering rabid wildlife.

Livestock, too, can be a source of exposure to humans, and the earliest symptoms that manifest in cows, horses, sheep, and goats aren't always consistent. For instance, cattle or horses that have been bitten by a rabid raccoon or fox may display either furious- or dumb-form behavior. Because livestock owners may come into direct contact with livestock saliva, it's wise to contact your local veterinarian or Extension office to learn how to get a necropsy on any farm animal that dies shortly after exhibiting sudden behavioral changes.

How to Avoid It

As common sense would dictate, steering clear of direct contact with wild animals is important. Be especially leery of nocturnal animals that are out and active during daylight hours. Teach children about the dangers of interacting with wild animals—even seemingly friendly ones—as well as unknown dogs and feral cats. Ensure they're comfortable with reporting any bites or scratches to an adult.

As much as is practical and possible, exclude bats from your home with hardware cloth over attic vents and other openings.

Keep your pets' shots up to date.

As with other negative wildlife encounters, taking such steps as feeding pets indoors and keeping trash tightly secured in sturdy containers will lessen the likelihood of certain species lingering around your home.

If you do come into contact with a suspect animal, talk to a doctor immediately, even if unsure that a bite has actually occurred. If you're close enough to get saliva on your skin or in your eyes, you're close enough to be

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exposed to the rabies virus.

If bitten by a wild animal and capture is possible, the animal can be euthanized and tested for rabies.

Once a physician determines that treatment is necessary, the patient will be administered a single injection of human rabies immune globulin and four rabies vaccination shots over a two-week period. This post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) treatment is effective, provided that symptoms have not yet begun.

What Else Is Being Done

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) has been collaborating with state agencies to halt the western expansion of raccoon rabies, which is endemic in areas of the eastern and southeastern U.S. Along that border, vaccine sachets are being distributed from aircraft and vehicles. Vaccine is placed in a packet made from compressed fish meal and fish oil, and these act as an attractant to raccoons.

These packets aren't harmful to your pets if eaten, but each one swallowed by a dog or cat is one less that's available to raccoons, so if you're aware of a vaccine distribution in your part of the world, it's recommended to keep your pets confined for a few days.

Rabies has become much rarer in the U.S. thanks to concentrated efforts to deal with it, and while it isn't

something to lose sleep over, it's a threat about which anyone who may encounter wildlife in their day-to-day should be aware. Taking some basic precautions when it comes to wild animals and feral dogs and cats can prevent tragedy down the road. ■

PHILLIP MEEKS is a forester and freelance writer. Originally from Tennessee, he currently resides in the mountains of southwest Virginia.



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