



Hawaii State Department of Health
Disease Investigation Branch
Oahu 586-4586, Maui 984-8213, Hilo 933-0912,
Kona 322-4877, Kauai 241-3563

Rabies

(Hydrophobia)

What is Rabies?

Rabies is a severe fatal disease caused by the rabies virus that affects all mammals, including humans. Rabies infection causes damage to the nervous system and death. The majority of rabies occurs in wild animals; on the US mainland, animals most often infected include skunks, foxes, raccoons, and bats. Rabid (rabies virus-infected) animals show behavioral changes such as aggressiveness, fear or friendliness that progress to paralysis, difficulty swallowing, overreaction to light and sound and death in 7 to 10 days.

Rabies infection is preventable if a person is given treatment after a bite wound from a rabid animal. Most human deaths from rabies occur in developing countries such as Africa and Asia where prompt medical care may not be available. It is estimated that 55,000 people die of rabies worldwide each year. There are 2 to 3 human deaths a year in the US that are often associated with exposure to bats. Hawaii is the only state in the United States that is free of rabies. Hawaii has a rabies quarantine for dogs and cats entering Hawaii to prevent rabies.

How do you get it?

Rabies is usually spread to humans through the bites of rabid animals whose saliva contains the virus. You can also get rabies when saliva from a rabid animal gets directly in to the eyes, nose, mouth, or a wound. Immediate treatment of patients who have been exposed to rabies is very effective and can prevent rabies infection.

What are the symptoms of Rabies?

The signs of rabies may take 1 to 3 months to develop after exposure. Early symptoms include malaise, alternating periods of irritability (bad temper), and anxiety (nervousness), headache, fever, confusion, abnormal behavior and sometimes itching or pain at the site of the bite. Rabies infection generally progresses to numbness or muscle paralysis, spasms of the throat muscles (rabies is also known as hydrophobia or fear of water because it is painful for patients to swallow water), seizures, mental confusion, coma and death within 2 to 10 days. Recovery is very rare.

When do symptoms start?

The symptoms of rabies usually start 2 to 8 weeks after exposure to a rabid animal. Rarely, it can take as few as 5 days or more than a year for symptoms to appear.

What is the treatment for rabies?

There is no treatment for rabies virus infection after clinical symptoms start, and the disease is almost always fatal. However, doctors can prescribe medicines (called post exposure prophylaxis, or PEP) to be given after exposure and before symptoms begin that may keep the disease from developing. After an animal bite, immediately and carefully wash the entire site of the bite or wound with lots of soap and water. See your physician for treatment of animal bite wounds. In Hawaii, patients with animal bites generally do not need to be treated with PEP. However patients who are bitten by animals on the mainland US or foreign countries may need PEP treatment.

Domestic dogs, cats, ferrets or livestock that have bitten a person and appear normal can be observed for development of clinical signs of rabies for 10 days under veterinary supervision.

What happens if you are exposed to rabies and don't get treated?

If left untreated, rabies is almost always fatal, but exposure to a rabid animal does not always result in disease. When rabies is suspected, getting immediate PEP can be effective in preventing disease.

How can you keep from getting it?

Avoid contact with all wild animals, especially those acting abnormally such as being active during the day or approaching people.

People at risk of exposure to rabies, such as veterinarians, animal handlers, laboratory workers or spelunkers should get vaccinated for rabies.

In areas where rabies is found (mainland United States and foreign countries), vaccinate pets and livestock to protect them from rabies infection.

For more information:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

<http://www.cdc.gov/rabies/>

Iowa State University Center for Food Security and Public Health:

http://www.cfsph.iastate.edu/FastFacts/pdfs/rabies_F.pdf