

# Preventing Rabies



## What is rabies?

Rabies is a very serious disease that affects the brain and spinal cord of mammals, such as cats, dogs, raccoons, coyotes, foxes, and occasionally people. Rabies is caused by a virus and almost always leads to death. The virus is usually spread from animal to animal, but it can also spread from an infected animal to a person.

## How is rabies spread?

Rabies spreads when an infected animal bites another animal or person, or if their saliva (spit) gets into a scratch or wound, eyes, nose, or mouth of another animal or person.

You CANNOT get rabies from:

- Patting or casual contact with an animal that has rabies
- Contact with the blood, urine, or feces from an animal that has rabies
- Skunk spray

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## **How often do people get rabies in the United States?**

It is very rare for people to get rabies in the United States. Of the 55,000 people who die of rabies every year around the world, only one or two of those deaths occur in the United States. The last death from rabies acquired in Massachusetts occurred in 2011 and was caused by exposure to a bat.

## **How common is rabies in animals in Massachusetts?**

Rabies in animals is fairly common in Massachusetts. Since 1985, more than 5,000 animals have tested positive for rabies in Massachusetts. Most of these cases occurred in wild animals like raccoons, skunks, bats, woodchucks and foxes, but every year some pets (especially cats) and farm animals also get rabies. Fortunately, there is a vaccine to protect dogs, cats and some other kinds of animals from rabies.





## **Is there something special about bats and rabies?**

Yes. Most of the recent human cases of rabies in the U.S. have been caused by bats. Any possible contact with bats should be taken seriously. This includes a bite or scratch, waking up with a bat in the room, or finding a bat in a room with a young child or mentally impaired person. Bat teeth are so small that a person may not realize they have been bitten, so bat exposures need to be carefully evaluated.

## **Are there any animals that do not get rabies?**

Yes. Birds, fish, reptiles (such as snakes, turtles and lizards), amphibians (such as frogs and salamanders) and insects (bugs) cannot get or spread rabies.



## **How can I tell if an animal has rabies?**

You cannot tell if an animal has rabies just by looking at it. Some animals with rabies may act strangely or aggressively after the virus affects their brains while others may seem just fine. To find out if an animal had rabies, a test has to be done on its brain after it has died.

## **If a person is exposed to rabies will they definitely get sick?**

After a person is exposed to rabies, they can be given shots (called “rabies immune globulin” or “RIG”) around the bite or scratch to help fight the virus where it entered the body, as well as an additional 4 or 5 shots of rabies vaccine in their arm over several weeks. This combination of RIG and vaccine following an exposure is called the rabies post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) series. Recommendations suggest that the PEP series be started promptly after exposure, but as long as the shots are given before the person starts to get sick, this will prevent them from getting rabies. If a person does not get the shots and then gets sick with rabies there is no effective treatment. Unfortunately, rabies is almost always fatal once symptoms have begun.



## **What you should do if you think you've been exposed to rabies:**

If you are bitten or scratched by an animal:

- Wash the wound with soap and water right away for ten minutes.
- Call your doctor or local board of health. They can help you determine if you need to be treated for rabies exposure.
- If you were exposed to a wild animal, contact your local board of health - they may be able to identify resources to help catch the animal that scratched or bit you.
- If you were bitten or scratched by a cat, dog, ferret or cow, contact the local Animal Inspector who will monitor the animal and watch for any symptoms for 10 days. If they stay healthy, they did not expose you to rabies.



## **What you should do if you think your pet has been exposed to rabies:**

If your pet is bitten or scratched by another animal:

- Try to find out what type of animal bit or scratched your pet but DO NOT touch the attacking animal.
- Use gloves and a hose to wash your pet's wounds. Do not touch your pet with your bare hands. There may be saliva from the rabid animal still on your pet, even if you don't see a bite or wound.
- Call your veterinarian to help you determine if the animal needs medical attention.
- If your pet was exposed to a wild animal, contact your local Animal Inspector – they may be able to identify resources to help catch the animal that scratched or bit your pet.
- If your pet was bitten or scratched by a cat, dog, ferret or cow, contact the local Animal Inspector who will monitor the animal and watch for any symptoms for 10 days. If they stay healthy, they did not expose your pet to rabies.
- In some cases, it may be necessary to confine your animal and watch it to see if it develops signs of rabies. Your local animal inspector can help you determine if this is necessary.

## How can I keep myself and others from getting rabies?

- Teach children never to approach animals they don't know – even if they appear friendly.
- Report any animal that behaves oddly to your local animal control official.
- Enjoy wild animals from a distance. Do not keep wild animals as pets. This is against the law in Massachusetts.
- Make sure your pets are vaccinated against rabies. By law, all dogs, cats and ferrets must be regularly vaccinated against rabies.
- Don't leave food or water for your pets outside. Even empty bowls will attract wild and stray animals.
- Do not let pets roam freely. Keep them in a fenced yard or on a leash.
- Keep your garbage securely covered. Open garbage will attract wild or stray animals.
- Keep your chimney capped and repair holes in attics, cellars, and porches to help keep wild animals like bats and raccoons out of your home.



## **Bats in the Home**

### **How to determine if bats are already in your house:**

- Listen for squeaking noises coming from the attic or walls.
- Inspect the attic, rafters, porches, and walls for signs of bats, including holes in walls, bat guano (feces) and crystallized urine, dirty stain marks underneath eaves, or bare scratched areas on beams.
- Walk around the outside of the house at dusk to see if bats are flying out of the house to feed, or before dawn to see if bats are flying into the house to sleep.

### **What you should do if you find a bat in your home:**

- If the bat is found in a room with a sleeping person, an unattended young child, a mentally incapacitated person, or a pet, the bat should be safely captured and tested for rabies.
- Call your local Animal Inspector or board of health to help get the bat tested for rabies.
- Call your doctor, your local board of health, or the Massachusetts Department of Public Health to help you determine if you need to be treated for a rabies exposure.

### **If you are certain there was no contact between the bat and any human or pet:**

- The bat can leave on its own, or if already captured, it can be released.

- To allow a bat to leave a home, close the room and closet doors, open windows, turn on a light (if the room is dim) and observe the bat until it leaves. Be sure to close the windows once the bat has left.
- To release a captured bat, take the container outdoors and wearing gloves (heavy, preferably pliable thick leather) remove the lid to allow the bat to fly away.

**To get bats out of a house in which they are living:**

- Determine the bats' entry and exit points by observing the house at dusk or dawn.
- After the bats have exited at night, seal up all entry and exit points larger than  $\frac{5}{8}$  inches by  $\frac{7}{8}$  inches. Alternatively, a special netting or tubing can be used in a manner that allows bats to exit a house, but not re-enter.
- Consult pest experts specializing in bat control when necessary.
- Killing bats is seldom necessary or desirable, and poisoning bats is illegal in Massachusetts.



### **To keep bats from entering or re-entering buildings:**

- Openings should not be sealed while bats are inside – this may drive them into occupied areas or create a sanitary problem if the bats are trapped and die inside.
- Major home renovations and sealing should be done during the month of May or from August 1 through mid-October, when most bats have left to hibernate or have raised their young.
- Make sure windows have screens, chimneys are capped, and electrical and plumbing openings are plugged.
- Do not leave unscreened doors or windows open.
- Seal up all openings larger than 5/8 inches by 7/8 inches into the attic, basement, walls, or occupied areas of the house.
- Use materials such as expanding spray-on foam, caulk, wire mesh, wood that fits tightly, steel wool (around pipes that enter buildings), or polypropylene bird netting, to seal or cover gaps and holes.

# Which animals should be tested for rabies?

Call your local Board of Health or the Animal Inspector if you think you need to submit an animal for testing.

## Category 1

Bat  
 Bear  
 Beaver  
 Bobcat  
 Coyote  
 Fisher  
 Fox  
 Otter  
 Raccoon  
 Skunk  
 Woodchuck

### YES

Always test if a human or pet is exposed.

These animals are either known rabies carriers or are considered likely to have the potential to spread rabies.

## Category 2

Cat  
 Cow  
 Dog  
 Ferret

### SOMETIMES

Test following human or pet exposure if 10-day quarantine is not possible or not appropriate (for example, the animal is already sick).

These animals can only spread rabies up to 10 days before showing symptoms.

## Category 3

Alpaca/lama  
 Chinchilla  
 Deer  
 Domestic/pet rabbit  
 Goat  
 Guinea pig  
 Horse  
 Mink  
 Moose  
 Muskrat  
 Opossum  
 Pig  
 Porcupine  
 Sheep  
 Squirrel  
 Weasel

### RARELY

These are handled case by case and require Department of Public Health or Department of Agriculture approval before testing.

These animals are occasionally found to have rabies but bites from these animals have never resulted in a human case of rabies in the US.

## Category 4

Chipmunk  
 Gerbil  
 Hamster  
 Mole  
 Mouse  
 Rat  
 Shrew  
 Vole  
 Wild rabbit/Cottontail

### NO

Rabies testing is not needed.

These animals are almost never found to have rabies and bites from these animals have never resulted in a human case of rabies in the US.

# How to capture a bat:

## When to capture a bat:

- If contact between a person and a bat may have occurred, even if no wounds can be seen.
- If a bat is found close to a sleeping person, an unattended young child, a mentally incapacitated person, or a pet.

## Items needed for a bat capture kit:

You can find most of the following items at hardware stores or home & garden centers.

- **Gloves** – heavy, preferably pliable, thick leather
- **Kitchen tongs** – 9-12 inches long
- **Coffee can or similar container** – preferably with a tight-fitting lid.
- **Sheet of cardboard**
- **Tape**
- **Net** – with fine mesh and long handle.
- **Flashlight** – to locate the bat without scaring the animal and causing it to fly around in alarm.

## How to capture a bat on a wall:

**Use a container** – Close all the doors and windows in the room then wait until the bat lands. Approach slowly, placing the container over the bat. Slide the cardboard between the wall and the container, lifting away from the wall as a unit. Slowly slide the cardboard off the container while simultaneously slipping on the appropriately sized lid. Tape the lid to the container so the bat can not escape and label the container so it is not accidentally opened. Contact your local board of health.

## How to capture a bat in a high place or in flight:

**Use a net** – Bats are very sensitive to movement around them. To capture a bat with a net you have to come from behind. Transfer the bat to a container with forceps or thick leather gloves.

**Avoid doing anything that might crush the bat's skull and make it unsuitable for testing.**



## Where can I get more information?

Contact your doctor, nurse or clinic, or local board of health (listed in the phone book under local government). You can also contact:

### **Massachusetts Department of Public Health**

Division of Epidemiology and Immunization  
(617) 983-6800 or toll-free at 1-888-658-2850  
[www.mass.gov/dph/rabies](http://www.mass.gov/dph/rabies)

### **Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources**

Division of Animal Health  
(617) 626-1810  
[www.mass.gov/agr](http://www.mass.gov/agr)



### **Massachusetts Department of Public Health**

Bureau of Infectious Disease  
Division of Epidemiology and Immunization  
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Jamaica Plain, MA 02130  
Phone: 617-983-6800