



Town of Barnstable Public Health Division

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Rare but life-threatening disease still requires caution

Rabies is a fatal disease that is spread when an animal with rabies bites or comes in very close contact with another animal or person. The rabies virus is carried in the saliva of infected animals. Rarely, infected animals can also spread rabies if their saliva gets into a scratch or other wound or the eyes, nose or mouth of another person or animal. If a person knows that he or she has been exposed to rabies, disease can be prevented in people by administering vaccine and antibodies promptly. There have not been documented cases of human-to-human spread of rabies except in a few cases involving organ transplants.

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MA DPH) recommends that if you are bitten or scratched by an animal, wash the wound with soap and water for ten minutes and call your health care provider to determine if you need to be treated for a rabies exposure. Our local animal control officer may be able to help identify the animal for either testing or quarantine.

Because bats can be a source of rabies, if there is direct contact with a bat, or a 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. Directions for safely capturing a bat without touching it are available on the MA DPH website: Capturing a Bat What You Need and How to Do It <http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/docs/dph/cdc/rabies/bat-capturing.pdf> Call the Animal Control Officer (508 790-6274) for help in getting the bat tested for rabies, and call your healthcare provider or DPH at (617) 983-6800 to help you determine if you need to be treated for a rabies exposure.

The MA DPH continues to monitor rabies in bats and land mammals through testing at the Hinton State Laboratory Institute in Jamaica Plain. There are many things people can do to help prevent rabies in Massachusetts.

- 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.
- Teach children to never 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 feed food or water to your pets outside. Even empty bowls will attract wild and stray animals.
- Keep your pets in a fenced yard or on a leash and do not let them roam freely.
- Keep your garbage securely covered. Open garbage will attract wild or stray animals.

The control of rabies in dogs in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s virtually eliminated human rabies in this country, although approximately 55,000 people die of rabies annually in other parts of the world. One to three human rabies cases are reported in the United States each year. Most of these cases are a result of exposure to rabid bats in the United States; the rest have been due to exposure to rabid dogs in other parts of the world.

Rabies was first discovered in bats in Massachusetts in 1961. Since that time, approximately 5% of bats tested at the DPH Hinton State Laboratory Institute have tested positive for rabies. Rabies from bats only occasionally spreads to people or other animals.

Raccoon rabies arrived in Massachusetts in 1992. Since then, more than 5,000 animals have tested positive for rabies. 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. There has only been one reported human case of rabies caused by the raccoon strain in Virginia in 2003.

More information about rabies is available at: www.mass.gov/dph/rabies.