

What is rabies?

Rabies is a very serious disease that affects the brain and spinal cord of mammals (if an animal has hair or fur, it is a mammal). Cats, dogs, raccoons, coyotes and foxes are mammals, as are people. Rabies is caused by a virus and almost always causes death. Rabies is usually a disease of animals, but it can spread from an infected animal to a person. Birds, fish, reptiles (such as snakes, turtles and lizards), amphibians (such as frogs and salamanders) and insects (bugs) cannot get or spread rabies.

How is rabies spread?

Rabies spreads when an animal with rabies bites another animal or person. The rabies virus is in the saliva (spit) of infected animals. 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.

How common is rabies in animals in Massachusetts?

Fairly common. Since 1992, 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.

Can you tell if an animal is rabid?

You cannot tell if an animal has rabies just by looking at it. Rabid animals may act strangely after the virus affects their brains, or they may seem just fine. Sometimes, rabid animals may aggressively attack people or other animals. Sometimes, a test is done on an animal's brain to find out if it had rabies.

What should you 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 health care provider or local board of health (**978-368-4000**). They can help you determine if you need to be treated for a rabies exposure.
- Your local animal control officer may be able to catch the animal that scratched or bit you. Wild animals should be tested immediately for rabies. Cats, dogs, ferrets and cows can be watched for 10 days. If they stay healthy, they did not expose you to rabies.

What should you do if you think your pet has been exposed to rabies?

If your pet is bitten or scratched by another animal:

- Call your veterinarian to help you determine if the animal needs medical attention.
- Your local animal control officer (**978-368-1380**) may be able to catch the animal that scratched or bit your pet. Wild animals should be tested immediately for 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 you help prevent rabies in Massachusetts?

- 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. (**978-368-1380**)
- 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 or water 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.
- 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.