

Frequently asked questions about rabies

1. How is rabies spread?

Rabies is spread through a bite from a rabid animal. The virus is shed in the saliva of infected mammals starting a few days before symptoms begin and throughout the symptomatic period. Non-bite exposures are possible, but rare. These could include scratches or any contact with saliva or brain/nervous tissue through open cuts in the skin or mucous membranes. In some cases, bites or scratches from a bat can be too small to see or feel, especially if they happen while asleep. If you find a bat in the bedroom when you wake up or have any uncertainty about contact with a bat (i.e., an unattended child, intoxicated individual, otherwise incapacitated individual in the room with a bat) please call your [local health department](#) and request a consultation to determine your rabies exposure risk.

2. What are the symptoms of rabies?

Rabies is a disease of the nervous system caused by a virus that can occur in humans and animals, and is nearly always fatal.

Human rabies rapidly progresses with a duration of 2–21 days. Early symptoms include pain, numbness/tingling at the site of the bite, fatigue, headache, and fever. Behavioral changes may also be apparent, including apprehension, anxiety, agitation, irritability, insomnia, and depression. Later symptoms include disorientation and hallucinations, paralysis, episodes of terror and excitement, hydrophobia (fear of swallowing liquids), hyperventilation, hypersalivation, and seizures. These symptoms are invariably followed by coma and death. Once symptoms begin, drugs or treatments typically do not improve the patient's condition.

In animals, the first sign of rabies is usually a change in the animal's behavior. Animals with rabies can appear aggressive ("furious" rabies) or meek ("dumb" rabies). Animals with furious rabies often exhibit aggressive or unusually excited behavior; they may excessively salivate and may attack other animals or humans. Dumb rabies may be more difficult to detect. Animals may seem tame, wounded, or dazed. Nocturnal animals may be out during the day, or bats may be found on the ground unable to fly. Rabid animals may seem unafraid of humans. It is important

to note the behavior of an animal is not a reliable indicator of whether or not it has rabies. Testing the brain is the only way to tell whether an animal is rabid.

3. What animals are most likely to carry rabies?

Only mammals can carry rabies. Bats are the primary source of rabies in Utah. Other mammals of concern known to carry rabies in neighboring areas of the United States include raccoons, skunks, foxes, and coyotes.

Domestic animals such as dogs, cats, and ferrets can become infected by a bite by a rabid wild animal, but fortunately this is rare.

Wild small rodents and lagomorphs such as squirrels, rats, mice, rabbits, and hares are almost never found to be infected with rabies and have not been known to transmit rabies to humans.

4. What should I do if I find a bat in my home?

Do NOT touch the bat. If you are certain no people or pets have come in contact with the bat, confine the bat to a room. Close all doors and windows leading out of the room except those to the outside. The bat will often fly out an open door or window. If the bat does not leave or this method is not possible, contact your [local animal control](#), the [Utah Division of Wildlife Resources](#), or [pest control](#) to help remove the bat.

If a bat has bitten or scratched someone or exposed a pet, has been in a bedroom overnight while a person was asleep, or if there is any question about whether the bat has been in contact with people or pets, the bat needs to be captured and tested for rabies. Scratches or bites from a bat can be too small to see or feel. Contact your [local animal control](#) or the [Utah Division of Wildlife Resources](#), and your [local health department](#) for assistance right away.

5. What should I do if there is a wild animal on my property?

Contact the [Utah Division of Wildlife Resources](#), your [local animal control](#), or [pest control](#) to help safely trap and remove the animal. If there is concern that a person or pet has been bitten or scratched by the animal, see below for further guidance.

6. What should I do if I am bitten or scratched by a wild animal?

Wash any wounds immediately with soap and water, and seek medical attention for additional wound treatment. If the animal is still in the area, contact the [Utah Division of Wildlife Resources](#) or your [local animal control](#) to help trap the animal so it can be tested for rabies. Testing the animal is an important step to determine the level of concern for rabies exposure. Contact your [local health department](#) and consult with your healthcare provider for guidance on whether rabies [post-exposure prophylaxis \(PEP\)](#) is recommended. If the animal is not available to test, PEP is usually recommended as a precaution to protect you against rabies.

7. What should I do if I am bitten by a dog, cat or ferret?

Wash any wounds immediately with soap and water, and seek medical attention for additional wound treatment. Try to find the owners of the animal or determine the animal's location. Contact your [local animal control](#) to report the bite, and they will help to locate the animal so it can be placed under quarantine and monitored for 10 days. If the animal does not develop signs of rabies within that time, rabies PEP is not necessary. If the animal cannot be found and monitored, contact your [local health department](#) and consult with your healthcare provider for guidance on whether PEP is recommended.

8. What is rabies [post-exposure prophylaxis \(PEP\)](#)?

PEP is a series of injections given to a human after exposure to a rabid animal to prevent rabies disease. PEP consists of a regimen of one dose of human rabies immune globulin (HRIG) and four doses of rabies vaccine over a 14-day period. HRIG and the first dose of rabies vaccine should be given by your healthcare provider as soon as possible after exposure. This first visit is typically performed at an emergency department. Follow up vaccine doses can be given on an outpatient basis. Current vaccines are relatively painless and are given in your arm like a flu or tetanus shot. A list of PEP providers in the state can be found [here](#). If you are unsure where to go to start your PEP series, consult with your [local health department](#) for guidance.

9. Is it ever too late to start [rabies PEP](#)?

No. While it is recommended to start PEP as soon as possible after a potential rabies exposure, PEP should never be withheld due to a delay after exposure. If it

has been longer than seven days, human rabies immune globulin (HRIG) will likely not be given but the 4 dose rabies vaccine series is still effective in preventing rabies. The average incubation period for rabies in humans is 3-8 weeks, but can be as long as years in rare cases. Rabies is virtually 100% fatal and PEP is the only way to prevent rabies disease in an exposed person, so you should proceed with PEP if there is any possibility of a past exposure to rabies.

10. What should I do if my pet is bitten, scratched, or exposed to a wild animal?

Take your pet to your veterinarian for wound care and a booster rabies vaccine as soon as possible. Find your pet's rabies vaccination record since this will be needed to provide proof of prior vaccination. Contact your [local animal control](#) to help trap and test the wild animal if possible, and for instructions on how to quarantine and monitor your pet for signs of illness.

Animals that are kept up to date on rabies vaccination are [required by law](#) to be quarantined and observed for 45 days, but in many cases this can be done within your home. If your pet has never been vaccinated against rabies, it must either be euthanized immediately or kept in strict isolation from humans and other animals for 4-6 months at a professional facility (at your expense). There is no effective PEP for animals to prevent rabies.

11. Can a dead animal spread rabies?

Carcasses of rabid animals may contain infectious virus, depending on temperature and environmental conditions. Rabies virus may persist in a frozen carcass for many weeks. Drying and sunlight rapidly deactivate rabies virus. Dried saliva or a dried animal carcass would not contain live rabies virus.

12. Who should be vaccinated for rabies?

Anyone who has been bitten or otherwise exposed to a possibly rabid animal should receive rabies vaccinations as part of their post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) treatment, as recommended by their doctor. See question 8 above for more details.

[Pre-exposure vaccination](#) is recommended for persons in high-risk groups, such as veterinarians, animal handlers, certain laboratory workers, and anyone whose activities bring them into frequent contact with species known to carry rabies.

Pre-exposure vaccination should also be considered for international travelers who are likely to come in contact with animals in areas where canine rabies is enzootic, and immediate access to medical care and biologics might be limited.

Although pre-exposure vaccination does not eliminate the need for medical attention and additional vaccination after a rabies exposure, it simplifies post-exposure therapy (eliminates the need for HRIG, and decreases the number of vaccine doses needed), might protect persons whose post-exposure therapy is delayed, and may provide protection to persons at risk for unapparent exposures to rabies.

13. Which animals should be vaccinated against rabies?

Vaccinate ALL dogs, cats, and ferrets. Not only is this [required by law](#), but it can save your pet's life! Low cost resources for pet rabies vaccination can be found [here](#).

Select horses and livestock should also be vaccinated against rabies. Consult with your veterinarian.

Reptiles and birds cannot be infected with rabies, and small rodents are highly unlikely to contract rabies and do not need to be vaccinated.

14. What is the best way to avoid rabies?

Keep your pets up to date on their rabies shots, and avoid contact with wildlife—especially bats.

15. What are other ways I can protect myself and my family?

- Do not feed, touch, or adopt wild animals, and be cautious of stray dogs and cats. Rabid animals do not always appear vicious!
- Teach children to leave wildlife alone. Be sure your child knows to tell you if an animal bites or scratches them.
- Vaccinate your pets and select livestock against rabies. Keep their vaccinations up-to-date.
- Tightly close garbage cans and feed bins. Open trash and feed bags attract wild or stray animals to your home or yard.
- Feed your pets indoors and never leave pet food outside as this attracts wildlife.
- Keep outdoor pets in a fenced yard.

- Avoid all contact with bats, especially bats found on the ground. If you find a bat on the ground, don't touch it! Report the bat and its location to your [local animal control](#), the [Utah Division of Wildlife Resources](#), or your [local health department](#).
- Call your doctor right away if an animal bites you. Contact your [local animal control](#) (domestic animal) or the [Utah Division of Wildlife Resources](#) (wildlife) and your [local health department](#) to report the incident.