

Rabies: Know the facts



An overview of the disease's signs and symptoms, how it's diagnosed and how you can keep your pets safe.

Signs and symptoms

In humans, symptoms of headache, fever and general weakness progress into insomnia, anxiety, confusion and hallucinations. As the disease advances, partial paralysis and difficulty swallowing become common. Once symptoms become apparent, death usually occurs within days.

Pets exhibit slightly different signs than humans. Most infected dogs develop clinical signs within 21 to 80 days after exposure. The disease has two main forms in animals: paralytic form and furious form.

Paralytic form

These pets will typically hypersalivate, lose the ability to swallow and may exhibit a dropped jaw. Animals with this form of rabies are typically nonaggressive and will not attempt to bite. Based on the clinical signs, owners may think the pet has something lodged in its mouth and conduct an examination, exposing themselves to saliva and increasing their risk of exposure.

Once signs begin to appear, they rapidly progress to paralysis in all parts of the body. Coma and death quickly follow.

Furious form

This is often what people think of when they hear the term rabies: a Cujo-style mad dog that froths at the mouth and lunges at terrified bystanders.

Paralysis is not the issue in this form. These animals may viciously attack with little provocation or warning. Infected animals become hypervigilant and anxious. Wild animals may lose their fear of humans, and nocturnal

species may be seen wandering around in the daylight. Ataxia and a change in vocal tone become apparent, as well as a change in temperament—quiet dogs become aggressive and rambunctious dogs become docile.

Diagnosis

An animal must be euthanized in order for rabies testing to confirm diagnosis. Tissue from the cerebellum and brain stem must be sent to a lab for analysis. The test itself only takes about two hours, but it can take as long as 24 to 72 hours to collect and euthanize the animal and to prepare and send the tissue samples to the lab. At the lab, immunofluorescence microscopy is used to look for antibody-antigen reactions specific to the rabies virus.

Prevention

Rabies vaccinations for dogs are required by most municipalities. Required rabies vaccinations for cats are on the rise, and with good reason. Cats account for approximately three times the number of rabies cases as dogs.

Pets should receive their first rabies vaccination at 12 to 16 weeks old, followed by a second vaccination a year later. After that point, pets should be vaccinated at one- or three-year intervals, based on local public health recommendations.

Pet owners can also cut down on rabies risk by monitoring their pets when outdoors, by calling animal control to remove potentially unvaccinated stray animals from the neighborhood and by avoiding leaving food and water and easily accessible garbage cans outside where they could attract wild animals.