

RABIES – WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Rabies is a dangerous disease caused by a virus that attacks the nervous system of mammals. It is a highly deadly disease for the host. The rabies virus is found in the saliva and brain tissues of rabid animals. It is most commonly transmitted through a bite. It can also be spread by getting saliva or brain tissue in a wound, the eye, or mouth. Transmittal of rabies only occurs after the onset of clinical symptoms. In animals, once symptoms occur, the animal will usually die within a matter of days. The time between exposure and noticeable symptoms, can vary significantly. Typically, the incubation period is three to eight weeks, but can be as little as nine days or as long as several years in rare cases.

Unfortunately, there is no cure for rabies once established in the host mammal and this includes humans. Rabies is 100% fatal in humans once symptoms develop unless a person receives a vaccine before the onset of symptoms. Currently, the only way to test for the disease is to examine the brain tissue of a dead animal, live animals cannot be tested. Rabies is preventable in dogs, cats, ferrets and some livestock with a rabies vaccination as well. For most wild animals, there is no effective rabies vaccine available.



SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF RABIES

In animals, early signs include behavioral changes such as anxiousness, aggression or, in wild animals, no fear of humans. As the disease progresses, they develop extreme sensitivity to light and sound. Animals may also have seizures or become vicious. The final stage of rabies involves paralysis of the nerves controlling the head and throat. The animal will produce excessive saliva and lose the ability to swallow. As the paralysis progresses, the animal eventually goes into respiratory failure and dies.

In humans, symptoms may include fever, headache and general weakness or discomfort. As the disease progresses, more specific symptoms appear such as insomnia, anxiety, confusion, partial paralysis, hallucinations, agitation, hypersalivation (increase in saliva), difficulty swallowing, and hydrophobia (fear of water).¹

RABIES IN VIRGINIA, HAMPTON ROADS AND LARC

The most common rabies carriers in Virginia are raccoons, bats, skunks and foxes. In Virginia, the raccoon variant of the rabies virus is the most prevalent and there is spillover to other mammals. Confirmed cases of rabies in Virginia are tracking last year's numbers. The Department of Health has recorded 441 cases for 2013 thus far and 455 cases in 2012.²

¹ <http://www.vb.gov/residents/animals-pets/Pages/rabid-animals.aspx>

² http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/epidemiology/DEE/Rabies/documents/statistics/10_31_13.pdf

According to the Virginia Department of Health's Office of Epidemiology there been several confirmed cases of rabies on the Peninsula. Hampton has recorded three rabid raccoons and one cat, Newport News has had ten rabid raccoons, and Williamsburg has had one rabid fox, one raccoon, and two skunks.³

While we've never had a confirmed case of a rabid animal on Center, having confirmed cases in Hampton and the surrounding communities does make it a real possibility. This is why it is so important not to feed wildlife on Center. Feeding wildlife encourages these animals to spend more time in the urbanized parts of the Center and reduces their natural fear of humans. This can only lead to trouble, especially if an animal does become rabid. That animal would be even more likely to venture into the core campus area of the Center.

If you know of any improper feeding of wildlife on Center or are aware of any areas on Center that may be attracting wildlife via food sources please contact Environmental at 4-7517 or 4-7762.

IF YOU HAVE BEEN BITTEN BY AN ANIMAL ON CENTER:

- Don't panic, but don't ignore the bite either. Contact 911 from a NASA phone or 864-2222 from a cell phone. If the wound is bleeding, apply pressure to the area with a clean cloth.⁴ Seek medical treatment as soon as possible for any bite regardless of severity.
- Typical first aid for a bite wound includes washing the wound thoroughly with soap and water. Washing thoroughly will greatly lessen the chance of infection. After you wash the wound, dry the area, apply an antibiotic ointment, and cover it with sterile gauze.
- If the animal can be captured safely (by closing a door or gate, etc.) then do so. At a minimum, try to identify the animal before it runs away, especially if the animal is acting strangely.
- Notify your family doctor immediately and explain how you got the bite. Your doctor will want to know if the animal has been captured. If necessary, your doctor will give the anti-rabies treatment or send you to a provider that can. Your doctor may also treat you for other possible infections that could be caused from the bite.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP CONTROL RABIES IN YOUR LOCAL COMMUNITY:

- Have your veterinarian vaccinate your dogs, cats, ferrets, and selected livestock. Keep the vaccination at appropriate intervals.

³ http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/epidemiology/DEE/Rabies/documents/statistics/10_31_13.pdf

⁴ Moore, S. (2011). *Griffith's Instructions for Patients* (8th ed.). Philadelphia, PA: Saunders Elsevier.

- If your pet is attacked or bitten by a wild animal, report it to the local health or animal control authorities.
- Limit the possibility of exposure by keeping your animals on your property. Don't let pets roam free.
- Do not leave garbage or pet food outside. It may attract wild or stray animals.
- Do not keep wild animals as pets. Enjoy all wild animals from a distance, even if they seem friendly. A rabid animal sometimes acts tame. If you see an animal acting strangely, report it to your local animal control department and do not go near it yourself.