Rabies is a preventable viral disease of mammals most often transmitted through the bite of a rabid animal. The vast majority of rabies cases reported to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) each year occur in wild animals like raccoons, skunks, bats, and foxes.

The rabies virus infects the central nervous system, ultimately causing disease in the brain and death. Early symptoms of rabies in people are similar to that of many other illnesses, including fever, headache, and general weakness or discomfort. As the disease progresses, more specific symptoms appear and may include insomnia, anxiety, confusion, slight or partial paralysis, excitation, hallucinations, agitation, hyper salivation (increase in saliva), difficulty swallowing, and hydrophobia (fear of water). Death usually occurs within days of the onset of these symptoms.

When should I seek medical attention?

Rabies virus is transmitted through saliva or brain/nervous system tissue. You can only get rabies by coming in contact with these specific bodily excretions and tissues. It is important to remember that rabies is a medical urgency but not an emergency. Decisions should not be delayed.

Wash any wounds immediately. One of the most effective ways to decrease the chance for infection is to wash the wound thoroughly with soap and water. See your doctor for attention for any trauma due to an animal attack before considering the need for rabies vaccination.

Is there a medical treatment for rabies?

Your doctor, possibly in consultation with your state or local health department, will help you decide whether to start rabies vaccination, known as post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP).

In the United States, PEP consists of human rabies immune globulin (HRIG) and four doses of rabies vaccine over a 14-day period. Rabies immune globulin and the first dose of rabies vaccine should be given as soon as possible after exposure. Additional doses or rabies vaccine should be given on days 3, 7, and 14 after the first vaccination. Rabies can be prevented almost 100% of the time when PEP is administered soon after a rabies exposure occurs. Current vaccines are relatively painless and are given in your arm, like a flu or tetanus vaccine.
How can you prevent rabies in people?

Rabies in humans is preventable through prompt and appropriate medical care.

The main source of rabies in WV is from rabies in wildlife. Children are often at greatest risk from rabies. They are more likely to be bitten, and are also more likely to be severely exposed through multiple bites in high-risk sites on the body. Severe exposures make it more difficult to prevent rabies unless access to good medical care is immediately available.

Rabies in humans can be eliminated through ensuring adequate animal vaccination and control, educating those at risk, and having appropriate medical care easily accessible to those who have been bitten.

There are several things you can do to protect your pet from rabies:

First, visit your veterinarian with your pet on a regular basis and keep rabies vaccinations up-to-date for all cats, ferrets, and dogs.

Second, maintain control of your pets to reduce their exposure to wildlife.

Third, spay or neuter your pets to help reduce the number of unwanted pets that may not be properly cared for or vaccinated regularly.

The importance of vaccinating your pet.

Although the majority of rabies cases occur in wildlife, most humans are given rabies vaccine as a result of exposure to domestic animals. This explains the tremendous cost of rabies prevention in domestic animals in the United States.

What can you do?

• vaccinate your pet
• maintain control of your pets to reduce their exposure to wildlife
• if you suspect your pet of being exposed, isolate the pet and wear protective gloves if you have to handle the pet
• wear gloves when handling the carcasses of dead wild animals
• spay or neuter to decrease the number of stray animals
• report all animal bites to the local public health department
• seek medical attention for your bite

Animal bites and Other Potential Rabies Exposures should be reported to the local health department within 24 hours. For more information, contact the Monongalia County Health Department at 304-598-5100 or visit the website at www.monchd.org

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