

# Understanding Rabies

The number of human deaths in the United States caused by rabies has declined to an average of only one or two per year--far less than the number of human fatalities caused by lightning strikes and bad hamburgers. This doesn't mean you shouldn't take precautions to protect yourself, your family, and your pets. The best ways to guard against rabies:

- Don't approach or handle wild animals, especially sick wild animals

- Vaccinate your pets

- Get prompt post-exposure treatment when advised to do so by a doctor or health department

## What is rabies?

Rabies (Lyssavirus) is an infectious disease that affects the central nervous system in mammals. It's transmitted through the saliva a few days before death when the animal "sheds" the virus. Rabies is not transmitted through the blood, urine, or feces of an infected animal, nor is it spread airborne through the open environment. Because it affects the nervous system, most rabid animals behave abnormally.

## Signs of rabies in animals

In the "furious" form, wild animals may appear to be agitated, bite or snap at imaginary and real objects, and drool excessively. In the "dumb" form, wild animals may appear tame and seem to have no fear of humans.

There are other signs, such as the animal appearing excessively drunk or wobbly, circling, seeming partially paralyzed, acting disorientated, or mutilating itself. However, most of these signs can also be indicative of other diseases like distemper or lead poisoning. There are few behavioral signs that are telltale of rabies alone.

If a typically nocturnal animal, such as a [raccoon](#) or [skunk](#), is active during the day and exhibiting abnormal behavior, you should seek advice from your local animal control, humane society, [wildlife rehabilitator](#), or [state wildlife agency](#).

## Key facts

- Rabies can't go through unbroken skin. People can get rabies only via a bite from a rabid animal or possibly through scratches, abrasions, open wounds, or mucous membranes in contact with saliva or brain tissue from a rabid animal.

- The rabies virus is short-lived when exposed to open air—it can only survive in saliva and dies when the animal's saliva dries up.

- If you handle a pet who has been in a fight with a potentially rabid animal, take precautions such as wearing gloves to keep any still-fresh saliva from getting into an open wound.

## Which species carry rabies?

Any warm-blooded mammal can carry or contract rabies, but the primary carriers in North America are [raccoons](#), [skunks](#), [bats](#), [foxes](#), and [coyotes](#). Thanks to an increase in pet vaccinations, wildlife now account for more than 90 percent of all reported rabies cases.

[Raccoons](#) suffer the most from this disease in the eastern U.S.

[Skunks](#) are the dominant rabies victims in the north- and south-central states, although [skunk](#) rabies also occurs in the East.

[Bats](#) suffering from rabies are not limited to any particular area but scattered widely.

[Foxes](#) in western Alaska, parts of Arizona and Texas, and the eastern United States are victims more frequently than foxes in other areas.

Rodents ([squirrels](#), [chipmunks](#), [rats](#), [mice](#), [hamsters](#), [gerbils](#), and [guinea pigs](#)), [rabbits](#), and hares rarely get rabies.

[Opossums](#) are amazingly resistant to rabies. Hissing, drooling, and swaying are part of the [opossum's](#) bluff routine.

## People and rabies

People who contracted rabies in the United States were mostly infected by a bat. Most didn't even know they were bitten. Some may have been sleeping when bitten. Others [handled a bat bare-handed](#) without realizing they'd been potentially exposed to rabies. But [don't panic over every bat sighting](#). Less than one-half of one percent of all bats in North America carries rabies.

Although [raccoons](#) suffer from rabies more than any other mammal in the United States (about 35 percent of all animal rabies cases), only one human death from the [raccoon](#) strain of rabies has been recorded in the United States.

## Precautions

Don't approach or handle wild animals.

Vaccinate your pets—cats and dogs both—and any free-roaming cats under your care.

If you see a wild animal who may be sick, contact your local animal control, veterinarian, or [wildlife rehabilitator](#) for help. Don't handle sick wildlife!

If anyone is bitten by any wild animal, get medical advice from a doctor or health department immediately.

If your pet is bitten by any wild animal, get medical advice from your veterinarian immediately.

Scrub any bite wound immediately and aggressively with soap and water, use antiseptic soap such as betadine or Nolvasan®, if available. Flush the wound thoroughly with water then go to your doctor or an emergency room.

If possible, the animal should be captured and tested for rabies. Unless you can do it without risking further bites, leave this task to animal control professionals.

If you find a [bat in a room where someone was sleeping](#) or where children might have had contact with him, the [National Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC) recommends that you [assume the bat has bitten the sleeper or children](#) and take the step for a known bite. CDC suspects that adults may overlook and children may underreport the bites of tiny bat teeth.

Timely treatment after a bite or other exposure is 100 percent effective. The very few people who die from rabies are those who don't get timely treatment