

Rabies Client Handout

Humans have enjoyed the companionship of their four-footed friends for centuries. Pets bring unconditional love, but are sometimes accompanied by zoonotic diseases. A number of scientific studies have found that direct contact with Pets can put people at risk for the transmission of a zoonotic disease.

What is a zoonotic disease?

Zoonotic diseases are any disease that can be transmitted from animals to humans and vice versa.

What is Rabies?

Rabies is a fatal viral infection that attacks the brain and spinal cord. Rabies is found worldwide and each year kills more than 50,000 people and millions of animals around the world. Rabies is most prevalent in Asia, Africa, and Central/South America. In the United States, rabies has been reported in every state except Hawaii.

Who in the family is at risk for Rabies?

Rabies can affect all mammals (warm-blooded animals) including people. In the United States, rabies mainly affects raccoons, skunks, foxes and bats. Historically, humans are at greatest risk for acquiring rabies from a dog because they account for the majority of animal bites reported in the country. Cats are also capable of transmitting rabies to people through bites along with any other infected animal.

How is Rabies transmitted?

Rabies is transmitted in the saliva of a rabid animal. The rabies virus is spread through saliva during bite wounds or direct contact with mucous membranes (mouth, inside of nose, eyes). The virus enters through the bite wound, and spreads through the peripheral nerves into the brain.

How do I know if my Pet may be infected with Rabies?

Symptoms are usually associated with odd and inappropriate behavior ultimately leading to depression, coma and death. Dogs who are usually gentle and obedient may become aggressive and out of control. Confident, self-assured Pets may become timid and fearful. The stereotypic picture of a rabid dog frothing at the mouth is due to paralysis of the throat muscles resulting in the inability to swallow. Death usually occurs within 10 days of showing symptoms. Infections in people also involve the central nervous system and once signs are present, the disease is almost always fatal.

Is Rabies treatable?

Unfortunately, **rabies is a non-treatable, fatal, zoonotic disease.** Any person bitten by an animal known to be, or thought to be infected with rabies, receives post-exposure treatment consisting of a series of anti-rabies prophylaxis (injections). The rabies incubation period (amount of time before clinical signs appear) can vary from a few days to a few months; this is why many countries require a six-month quarantine when moving Pets into the country. A vaccinated Pet that has bitten a person will usually be quarantined and observed by local authorities or a person of their designation for 10 days. If the rabies virus is present in the dog or cat's saliva the Pet will show clinical signs of the rabies virus within 10 days. Definitive testing for the rabies virus requires direct examination of brain tissue after euthanasia or death. Local officials usually euthanize unvaccinated Pets who have possibly been exposed to the virus, or have bitten a human, due to public safety concerns. These recommendations vary by state. Please check with your local health department for more information.

What can you do to protect the entire family from Rabies?

Vaccination of your cats, ferrets, and dogs is the most effective strategy to protect your family from the rabies virus and will help control this infectious disease in the mammal population. Rabies vaccine is required by law in all 50 of the United States for dogs and cats (some states require vaccination of other Pets as well). Different areas of the United States may require different schedules for vaccinating Pets. Ask your hospital team about your state, county and local vaccination guidelines.

In addition to vaccination, there are several things you can do to protect your Pet and family from rabies.

- Maintain control of your Pets by keeping cats and ferrets indoors and keeping dogs under direct supervision.
- Enjoy wild animals from afar. Do not handle, feed, or unintentionally attract wild animals with open garbage cans, Pet food or litter.
- Remind your children never to handle unfamiliar animals, wild or domestic, even if they appear friendly.
- Finally, treat **all** bite wounds as a serious matter and seek proper care from your Banfield veterinarian for your Pet family and your personal physician for your human family.

