



Hawaii State Department of Health

Disease Investigation Branch

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Rabies

(hydrophobia)

What is rabies?

Rabies is a very serious disease caused by a virus that affects wild animals, but humans can also become infected. Unless rabies infection is treated promptly, serious brain damage and death can result. Most deaths from rabies occur in developing countries where prompt medical attention and preventive vaccinations are not readily available. Hawaii is the only state in the United States that is free of rabies.

How do you get it?

Rabies is usually spread to humans through the bites of rabid (rabies-diseased) animals. You can also get rabies when a scratch or fresh break in the skin is directly exposed to the saliva from a rabid animal. All warm-blooded mammals, including humans, can get rabies. On the US mainland, wild animals that are most often associated with rabies include bats, raccoons, skunks and foxes.

What are the symptoms of rabies?

The early symptoms of rabies include malaise, alternating periods of irritability and anxiety, headache, fever, and sometimes, itching or pain at the site of the bite, and hydrophobia (fear of water). Rabies can lead to numbness or paralysis, spasms of the throat muscles, seizures, mental confusion, coma, and death.

When do symptoms start?

The symptoms usually start 2 to 8 weeks after exposure to a rabid animal. Rarely, it can take as few as 5 days or more than a year for symptoms to appear.

What is the treatment for rabies?

There is no treatment for rabies after symptoms start, and the disease is almost always fatal. However, doctors can prescribe medicines (called postexposure prophylaxis, or PEP) to be given after exposure and before symptoms begin that can prevent the disease from progressing. After an animal bite, immediately and carefully cleanse the entire site of the bite or wound with lots of soap and water. See a doctor immediately to determine whether PEP is indicated.

What happens if you are exposed to rabies and don't get treated?

If left untreated, rabies is almost always fatal. However, exposure to a rabid animal does not always result in the disease. When rabies is suspected, getting immediate PEP can be effective in preventing disease.

How can you keep from getting rabies?

Cleanse animal bites or wounds immediately with lots of soap and water. If rabies is suspected, especially in an area where rabies is a problem, promptly seek the advice of a doctor, the Department of Health, or the local health authority.

Avoid all wild animals, especially those acting strangely.

In areas where rabies is found, vaccinate pets to protect them from getting rabies.

For more information, see the CDC's website at <https://www.cdc.gov/rabies/>