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Cooperative Extension South Dakota State University

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Rabies in South Dakota

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Rabies is a highly fatal infection of the central nervous system. The virus causing rabies is shed in the saliva. The disease occurs in all warm-blooded animals and is usually transmitted by the bite of an infected animal. It can gain entrance by other ways; for example, if infected saliva from a rabid animal comes in contact with a cut or open wound.

Once the virus reaches the brain, the victim usually shows a drastic change in temperament, becoming either violent or abnormally quiet. Paralysis and death follow in a short time. Recovery from rabies has been reported, but it is doubtful if it occurs under usual conditions.

In South Dakota rabies is most common in skunks, cattle, and cats. These animals may transmit the disease to other domestic animals. Man may become infected from any animal source.

Many animals that are infected with rabies lose their natural fear of man and animals. During this phase of the disease, they may viciously attack man or animals which they normally would shun.

Immediately report to a physician a bite from any animal. Take the animal to a veterinarian as soon as possible with a complete history of the problem presented. Follow recommendations received from your veterinarian in regard to handling of the animal until the possibility of rabies has been eliminated.

SYMPTOMS IN ANIMALS

Consider animals exhibiting any of the following symptoms as rabies suspects and approach cautiously. Consult your veterinarian.

1. Animals which lack the normal fear pattern of wild animals.
2. Animals which exhibit viciousness and attack other animals and man.
3. Animals which are unable to swallow.
4. Animals which are slobbering and apparently are not swallowing their saliva.
5. Animals which are crying or bellowing in an unusual manner.

Remember — biting is the natural defense mechanism of most animals. When cornered, frightened, injured, or provoked, they may bite or even attack humans. This is normal. Just because an animal bites does not mean it has rabies, although this possibility should always be considered.

HANDLING OF THE SUSPECT ANIMAL

1. Do not destroy the animal unless absolutely necessary for its capture.
2. If destruction of the animal is absolutely necessary for its capture, be certain that the head is not damaged. The animal may be shot through the heart if necessary. Under no circumstances should the head be mutilated or crushed, since it is essential that the brain be in good condition for satisfactory rabies examination.
3. If captured, the animal should be confined and observed by a veterinarian for at least 14 days.
4. The animal should not be destroyed until the end of the confinement period or until active clinical signs of rabies have been observed by a veterinarian.
5. If the animal does have rabies it usually undergoes a change in behavior, becoming unusually excitable or quiet. This is followed by paralysis and death.
6. Although laboratory findings are the only definite basis for diagnosis, the history of the animal and the clinical signs of the disease must be taken into consideration. For these reasons the animal should not be destroyed but should be observed.
7. If the animal dies or it is necessary to kill it for capture, submit the entire animal to your veterinarian. He is familiar with processes and procedures for submitting it to a laboratory.

8. If the animal cannot be immediately taken to the veterinarian, be certain that it is cooled or chilled to prevent decomposition. Smaller animals may be placed in a plastic bag in the refrigerator. Larger animals may be placed in a tub or other container and covered with ice.

9. Your veterinarian may request that you deliver the animal to a laboratory to prevent delay in transportation time. Decomposed animals are often worthless for rabies examination.

10. It is recommended that non-vaccinated animals bitten by known rabid animals should be immediately destroyed. If, because of sentimental or other reasons this is not possible, place the animal under the observation of a veterinarian, in strict isolation. Your veterinarian may recommend a series of vaccinations for these exposed animals.

**FIRST AID**

If you or your family are bitten by an animal, immediately wash the wound with soap and clean water. Thoroughly disinfect the wound with any common disinfectant. Call your physician.

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**PREVENTION OF RABIES IN ANIMALS**

Several different vaccines are produced to prevent rabies in domestic animals. Vaccinate dogs, cats, other pets, and domestic animals only under the supervision of a veterinarian. It is essential that the proper vaccine be used to immunize each species of animal. The wrong vaccine used on some species of animals will actually cause rabies to develop. Drugs are useless in both man and animals for treating rabies.

**PREVENTION OF RABIES IN MAN**

Keep away from all animals suspected of being infected with rabies. Caution children to avoid stray animals and wildlife. Vaccinate household pets to help protect the family from rabies. Persons attacked by vicious animals need immediate medical attention. Consult with your family doctor or your veterinarian if you or your livestock are exposed to suspect rabid animals. Advise your veterinarian that you suspect rabies when you call him to check a rabies-suspect animal.

Vaccination of humans against rabies is recommended only for those in direct and continuous contact with animal populations where rabies is known to exist. Veterinarians, wildlife workers, dog control officers, and laboratory workers are examples. Consult your physician.

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**CONSULT YOUR VETERINARIAN. HE'S TRAINED TO HELP YOU PREVENT LOSSES FROM DISEASE.**

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