Rabies in South Dakota

Cooperative Extension South Dakota State University

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Rabies is a highly fatal viral infection of the central nervous system. The disease occurs in all warm-blooded animals, including humans, and is usually transmitted by the bite of an infected animal. The virus rarely gains entrance by another route; if saliva from a rabid animal comes in contact with an open wound, infection is possible.

Following exposure (a bite, in most cases) to the rabies virus, it is usually 15-60 days before clinical signs of disease develop. In rare instances it may be much longer, even several months.

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 whether it occurs under usual conditions.

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

In South Dakota, rabies is most common in skunks, cattle, dogs, and cats. Although all mammals are susceptible to rabies, squirrels, chipmunks, moles, mice, rabbits, rats, and other rodents seldom contract this disease.

Clinical signs of rabies in animals

Consider an animal exhibiting any one of the following signs as a rabies suspect and avoid contact.

1. An animal that lacks the normal fear pattern of wild animals.
2. An animal that is incoordinated or paralyzed.
3. An animal that exhibits viciousness and attacks other animals or humans.
4. An animal that is unable to swallow.
5. An animal that is sobbering and apparently not swallowing the saliva.
6. An animal that is crying or bellowing in an unusual manner.

Biting is the natural defense mechanism of most animals. When cornered, frightened, injured, or provoked, animals 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.

What is a rabies exposure?

An individual must have one of the following two contacts with a rabid animal:

1. A bite that penetrates the skin; or
2. Saliva entering an open cut, wound, raw denuded area of the skin, or mucous membrane.

Rabies-suspect animals: Submission for laboratory examination

1. Always take special precautions when submitting the carcass of a rabies-suspect animal for laboratory examination; for example, always wear gloves if you handle the carcass.

2. Wild animals suspected of having rabies should be destroyed and submitted to a veterinarian. Your veterinarian is familiar with laboratory submission procedures. (Note: In the past, the recommendation was to not destroy the animal unless absolutely necessary. New lab test procedures are now available, and this “waiting period” before destroying rabies-suspect animals is no longer necessary.)

3. 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.

4. If the animal cannot be immediately taken to the veterinarian, be certain that it is cooled or chilled to prevent decomposition. Animals may be placed in a container and covered with ice.

5. If a domestic animal is suspected of having rabies, consult your veterinarian immediately.

6. Remember: Decomposed animals are often worthless for rabies examination; deliver the animal to the lab as promptly as possible.

First aid

When there is an animal bite, immediately wash the
wound with soap and clean water. Thoroughly disinfect the wound with any common disinfectant and consult your physician as soon as possible.

**Post-exposure management**

These guidelines are those suggested by the National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians.

1. Any domestic animal should be regarded as having been exposed to rabies if it is bitten or scratched by a bat or by a wild carnivorous mammal that is not available for testing.

2. Unvaccinated dogs and cats that have been bitten by a rabid animal should be destroyed immediately.

3. After being exposed to rabies, dogs and cats whose rabies vaccination status is current should be revaccinated immediately, leashed, and confined 90 days.

4. Livestock known to have been bitten by rabid animals should be slaughtered immediately. If slaughtered within 7 days of being bitten, tissues may be eaten without risk of infection provided liberal portions of the exposed area are discarded. Federal meat inspectors will reject for slaughter any animal that has been exposed to rabies within 8 months.

5. No tissues or secretions from a clinically rabid animal should be used for human or animal consumption.

**Prevention of rabies in humans**

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 physician or your veterinarian if you or your livestock are exposed to animals suspected of being rabid.

Skunks, raccoons, and other wild animals should not be kept as pets. Skunks may be carriers of the rabies virus without having signs of illness; pet skunks have exposed many humans to rabies.

Pre-exposure vaccination of humans against rabies is recommended only for those in direct or 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.

**Prevention of rabies in animals**

Several different vaccines are available to prevent rabies in domestic animals. Vaccinate dogs, cats, other pets, and domestic animals only under the supervision of a veterinarian. Remember: Unvaccinated pets must be destroyed if exposed to a rabid animal.

Rabies booster vaccinations are given at varying times depending on the type of vaccine used. Follow the advice of your veterinarian and **vaccinate** your dogs and cats!

There are no approved rabies vaccines for wild animals so they cannot be vaccinated safely.