



FERAL CATS & RABIES

What to do if you get a bite or scratch

Some basic facts on rabies and cats:

1. The incidence of known rabies cases in cats is low (270 cases in the United States in 2001, the most recent year for which data is available from the Center for Disease Control & Prevention).
2. Most cases of rabies in cats come from areas (such as the Northeast) where there are large raccoon populations – raccoons are a vector species for rabies and can pass the virus onto cats.
3. There have been no known cases of rabies in humans from cats since at least 1975.

How the rabies virus spreads:

- a. **Exposure:** An animal with an active case of rabies can spread it through their saliva, so it can be transmitted by a bite, a scratch or if the infected saliva touches the eye, nose or mouth.
- b. **Incubation:** Once the rabies virus enters an animal's system, it incubates for 30 to 90 days on average, during which time the virus travels to the brain. An animal is NOT contagious during the incubation period.
- c. **Shedding (infectious):** Once the virus reaches the brain, it then travels to the salivary glands and can be transmitted to others. During the first five days of this acute phase, the animal may appear normal yet be contagious. Within ten days of the start of this acute, contagious stage, the animal will show signs of rabies, including acting vicious or aggressive, or seeming sick, shy, tired or dazed.

What to do if you are bit, scratched or otherwise exposed to the saliva of a feral cat:

A. If the cat is confined after exposure:

1. Clean out the wound thoroughly
2. Seek ***immediate*** medical attention. Your doctor may prescribe antibiotics to prevent common bacterial infections (which are especially caused by cat bites and can be serious) and may recommend other treatment as well.
3. If the cat is confined, it is usually not necessary to immediately start on a course of rabies prophylaxis, although your decision should be made in consultation with your medical doctor. In many cases, it is sufficient to

quarantine the cat – keeping him away from other animals or people - for 10 days.

4. If the cat dies or shows signs of ill health or rabid behavior during the 10 day quarantine period, contact a public health official or veterinarian to see if further testing is required. If you are uncertain whether the cat is showing symptoms, consult with a public health official or veterinarian and do not reach try to determine on your own whether further testing is needed. Further testing will require euthanasia if the cat is alive.
5. If the tests show the animal had rabies, then treatment for possible exposure to rabies is normally required. Consult your medical doctor in making this decision.
6. If the cat remains healthy after the 10 day quarantine period, the cat was not shedding the rabies virus at the time of exposure and normally no treatment of the person for rabies exposure is required.

CONSULT A PUBLIC HEALTH OFFICIAL OR VETERINARIAN in determining whether the cat has remained healthy during the quarantine period, whether treatment of the person is required and whether the cat should be released.

B. If the cat is not confined after exposure:

1. Clean out the wound thoroughly.
2. Seek ***immediate*** medical attention.
3. CONSULT YOUR MEDICAL DOCTOR to determine whether you should undergo a course of rabies prophylaxis treatment as a preventative measure.

Information in this fact sheet on how the rabies virus spreads and what to do if you are bitten, scratched or exposed to saliva has been derived in part from the brochure on “Animal Rabies” published by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Division of Epidemiology and Immunization, August 2003.