

Bite Wounds and Rabies Protocols

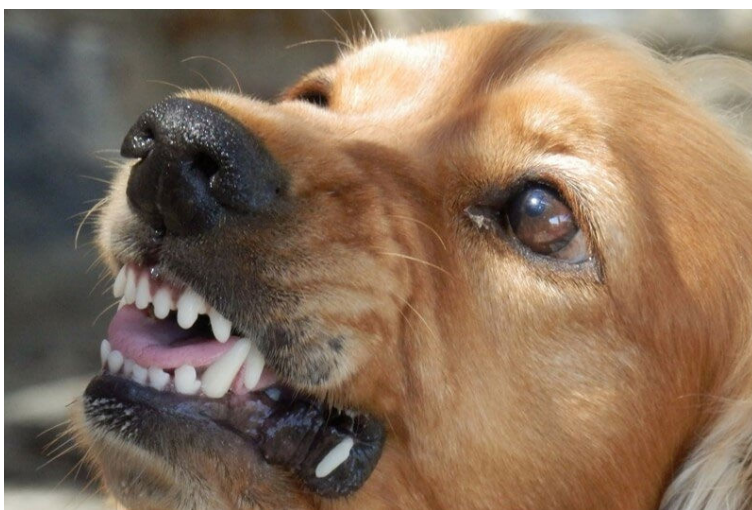


By Mara Ratnofsky, DVM
angell.org/generalmedicine
generalmedicine@angell.org
617-522-7282
April 2025

Rabies is a viral disease of mammals that is almost always fatal if not treated before symptoms begin. It is spread to humans and other animals via the saliva of an infected animal, usually through a bite or scratch. The virus affects the nervous system, causing brain and spinal cord inflammation. This results in fever, muscle spasms, confusion, seizures, aggression, excess saliva production, and paralysis. Once symptoms appear, the survival rate is essentially zero. Prompt treatment with a series of injections (immunoglobulin and rabies vaccines) after exposure to the virus will prevent the development of the disease.

Rabies is responsible for over 70,000 deaths worldwide each year. Most of these cases involve children being bitten by rabid dogs. In the US, where dog rabies is mostly controlled, bats are the main source of rabies. Foxes, skunks, and raccoons can also transmit the disease. While fewer than 10 people in the US die from rabies each year, it is still considered a public health threat due to its high fatality rate.

Massachusetts law requires all dogs and cats to be routinely vaccinated against rabies starting no later than 6 months of age. Rabies vaccines are considered valid for either one year or three years, depending on the timing of administration and the specific vaccine product used. Indoor cats are not exempt from this requirement, as wild animals can enter the house and expose them to rabies.



To control the spread of rabies, specific protocols must be followed when a pet has been bitten or scratched by a domestic animal, has been bitten or scratched by a wild animal, or has bitten a human. The protocols involve a quarantine period (significantly longer if the pet is unvaccinated), monitoring for signs of rabies, and boosting rabies vaccination. Specific guidelines can be found at <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/rabies-protocols-and-regulations>.

Please help keep your pet, yourself, and your community safe by vaccinating your pets against rabies. Get immediate medical attention following contact with a potentially rabid animal, and get vaccinated against

rabies if you have an increased risk of exposure. While rabies is almost 100% fatal, it is also almost 100% preventable in the US.