

Rabies in Dogs

**What is rabies?**

Rabies is a disease caused by a virus that attacks the brain. It can affect any warm-blooded animal, including dogs and humans. It is almost always fatal.

**What are the signs?**

There are three stages of the disease. The first is the “prodromal” phase, in which there is a marked change in temperament. The quiet dog becomes agitated and the active dog becomes nervous or shy. Other signs include dilated pupils, excessive drooling and snapping at imaginary objects.

After two or three days, the second phase begins. This is called the “excitatory” phase, meaning there is an exaggerated response to any stimulus. Dogs may experience bizarre changes in appetite, including eating or swallowing sticks, stones and other objects. The dog may roam aimlessly, inflict trauma upon him/herself and have a change in voice. He/she will often demonstrate vicious, aggressive behavior, even towards his/her owner. Seizures may also occur.

The third phase is called the “dumb” phase, in which the dog becomes extremely depressed. His/her mouth may gape open with the tongue protruding. A progressive paralysis sets in resulting in total body paralysis.

**What happens next?**

Ultimately, the dog dies. Although a few, rare dogs have survived rabies, these are clearly exceptional cases.

**How do I know if a dog has rabies?**

There are a number of diseases that can cause some of the signs of rabies and a few conditions can be very similar. Confirmation of rabies can only be made with special tests performed on brain tissue. This requires that the dog be euthanized and the brain be sent to a special diagnostic laboratory.

**Can I contract rabies?**

Yes. Rabies is transmitted by the bite of a rabid animal to another mammal. If you are bitten by any animal you do not know, immediately wash the wound thoroughly with soap and water. Try to establish the owner of the animal and whether the pet is currently vaccinated for rabies. In any case, seek the advice of your physician.

Post-exposure rabies treatment with serum or vaccination may be recommended. This is very successful when done quickly.

**Which wild animals are most likely to carry rabies?**

All mammals can catch rabies, but some are more susceptible than others. Foxes, skunks, raccoons and bats are particularly prone to rabies. One should also be very careful if any wild animal seems overly approachable or aggressive.

**Should I get my dog vaccinated?**

Absolutely. Rabies vaccines are very safe and effective. Vaccination is recommended for all dogs and required by law in many states, including Georgia. Vaccination for rabies is usually performed at three to four months of age, and then every one to three years thereafter (depending on the vaccine and local laws).