

Seek medical care if bitten by potentially rabid animals

Rabies is not something most American families worry about. Our dogs and cats receive routine vaccinations. Preventive treatment for people bitten by wild animals is safe and effective.

But the case of a Wisconsin girl who nearly died last year after being bitten by a bat underscores the need to be aware of rabies prevention. The teen picked up the ill animal after it finding it inside her church. She sought no treatment after the exposure and would have died if not for an experimental procedure developed by an infectious disease specialist. She is the only person ever to survive rabies without getting the shots.

Here is what parents need to know about rabies:

- Rabies, a disease that attacks the nervous system, is caused by a virus. In the United States, the most common carriers of this virus are bats, skunks, coyotes, foxes and raccoons. In the Third World, dogs pose the biggest rabies threat.
- Keeping pets vaccinated and teaching children to respect wildlife are the keys to rabies prevention. Children should be instructed to never approach ill or strange-acting animals. Bats, especially those found in your home or on the lawn, should never be handled.
- A person who has been bitten by a potentially rabid animal should wash the wound with soap and water and seek immediate medical care. In the United States, treatment consists of one dose of rabies immune globulin and five doses of rabies vaccine.
- Rabies shots are relatively painless, but you need to act right away. The incubation period for rabies typically is four to six weeks. But once symptoms set in, the disease is nearly 100% fatal.
- Although rabies is uncommon in dogs, cats and ferrets, any domestic animal that bites a person should be confined by its owner for 10 days and observed. If the animal becomes ill, it should be evaluated for rabies and the person who was bitten should seek medical advice about the need for treatment.
- Families traveling to developing areas of Africa, Asia or Latin American should consult with a doctor about whether to receive pre-exposure vaccination against rabies.



Teach children to avoid contact with wild animals, which could be infected with the rabies virus.

— Deborah Johnson

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