

A Deadly Disease & Recently Seen in Our Area

Rabies is a deadly virus which is nearly untreatable once symptoms begin. It is estimated to cause over 70,000 deaths in humans annually, though fortunately less so in North America. In wild and domestic animals, it is much more common.

Bats, skunks, foxes, raccoons, and coyotes are the usual culprits in spreading rabies to domestic species. Keep in mind that bats especially can access indoor areas more readily and therefore infect pets and people.

We do not always realize how fast death occurs from rabies. Once mild symptoms begin, death occurs within 10 days. Bear in mind though, it can take up to a year from the initial infective bite before the virus causes detectable symptoms.

Rabies is spread by saliva, usually through bite wounds. Infected saliva which comes in contact with a scratch, previously open wound, mouth, eye, or other mucous membrane can result in rabies infection. In veterinary practice, it is common to come in contact with the virus when performing oral exams on neurologic animals such as horses, cattle, dogs, etc. This is especially common in cases where the virus is being shed before clinical signs become apparent. The virus spreads through nerves from the site of infection to the brain, at which point it multiplies quickly. It is from there that other areas of the body become infected, in particular the salivary glands. The shorter the distance of the site of infection to the brain, the more quickly the virus travels to the brain and begins causing clinical symptoms.

It is common to think of rabies causing furious animals such as in the Old Yeller movie. Animals can become aggressive and excited, attacking other animals or mutilating themselves. However, very importantly, animals can also become depressed, try to hide (or in the case of wild animals, become oddly friendly), and develop neurologic signs. These can include, but are not limited to, paralysis of the legs, the face (for example drooling, dropping an ear), or can result in an animal appearing to be lame (which can be difficult to differentiate from a true lameness).

There is only one way to definitively diagnose rabies. This is by sending away the brain for testing following death. For this reason, there are different quarantine times for suspected cases depending on many different factors.

Treatment: None (once clinical signs appear).

If a person is exposed to a suspected rabies carrying animal, they can receive post-exposure vaccination. This should occur immediately. Your local medical professional will be able to administer these vaccinations. Also, individuals in high risk occupations, such as those working in veterinary practices, animal shelters, or with wildlife should consider getting themselves vaccinated. If you suspect your pet of being exposed to rabies, contact us immediately. As previously mentioned, different quarantine options are available.

Rabies is easily preventable with vaccination. Fortunately, there are excellent rabies vaccines available for humans, pets, livestock, and sometimes wildlife (though this is less practical). Fortunately rabies has not been so common in Northern BC compared to other areas of Canada, BUT WE HAVE NOW JUST RECENTLY SEEN A CASE! It was interesting for me, having moved here recently, to see that horses are not vaccinated on a regular basis for rabies. This is a common practice in Saskatchewan. Keep in mind that with so much travel by people and pets, livestock, and also wildlife, all diseases seem to arrive in different areas eventually. This is an important concept to keep in mind, even if you and your animals hardly ever travel.

Please contact the Dawson Creek Veterinary Clinic with any questions regarding rabies and vaccination protocols. Also, if you are in a contact with an animal that you are suspicious of being infected with rabies, please let us know as soon as possible, and contact your health care professionals right away.
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