



Animal Bites and Rabies Prevention

T R A V E L F A C T

Should I be concerned about rabies when I travel outside the United States?

Yes. Rabies and the rabies-like viruses can occur in animals anywhere in the world. In most countries, the risk of rabies in an encounter with an animal and the precautions necessary to prevent rabies are the same as they are in the United States. When traveling, it is always prudent to avoid approaching any wild or domestic animal. Developing countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America have additional problems in that dog rabies is common and preventive treatment for human rabies may be difficult to obtain. The importance of rabid dogs in these countries, where tens of thousands of people die of the disease each year, cannot be overstated. Dog rabies vaccination programs in developing countries have not always been successful as in the United States.

What animals get rabies?

Any mammal can get rabies. The most common wild reservoirs of rabies are raccoons, skunks, bats, foxes, and coyotes. Domestic mammals can also get rabies. Cats, cattle, and dogs are the most frequently reported rabid domestic animals in the United States.

How do people get rabies?

People usually get rabies from the bite of a rabid animal. It is also possible that people may get rabies if infectious material from a rabid animal, such as saliva, gets directly into their eyes, nose, mouth, or a wound. Non-bite exposures to rabies are rare. Scratches, abrasions, open wounds, or mucous membranes contaminated with saliva or other potentially infectious material from a rabid animal constitute non-bite exposures. Other contact, such as petting a rabid animal or contact with the blood, urine or feces of a rabid animal, does not constitute an exposure.

Should I receive rabies pre-exposure vaccination before traveling to other countries?

In most countries, the risk of rabies and the precautions for preventing rabies are the same as they are in the United States. If you are traveling to a country where rabies is present, you should consult your health care provider about the possibility of receiving pre-exposure vaccination against rabies. Pre-exposure vaccination is suggested if; (1) Your planned activity will bring you into contact with wild or domestic animals (for example, biologists, veterinarians, or agriculture specialists working with animals); (2) You will be visiting remote areas where medical care is difficult to obtain or may be delayed (for example, hiking through remote villages where dogs are common); and (3) Your stay is longer than 1 month in an area where dog rabies is common (the longer you stay, the greater the chance of an encounter with an animal).

If I get pre-exposure vaccination before I travel, am I protected if I am bitten?

No. Pre-exposure prophylaxis is given for several reasons. First, although pre-exposure vaccination does not eliminate the need for additional therapy after a rabies exposure, it simplifies therapy by eliminating the need for human rabies immune globulin (HRIG) and decreasing the number of vaccine doses needed - a point of particular importance for persons at high risk of being exposed to rabies in areas where immunizing products may not be readily available. Second, it may protect persons whose medical treatment might be delayed. Finally, it may provide partial protection to persons with unapparent exposures to rabies.

How soon after an exposure should I seek medical attention?

Medical assistance should be obtained as soon as possible after an exposure. One of the most effective methods to decrease the chances for infection involves thorough and immediate washing of the wound with soap and water.

Specific medical attention for someone exposed to rabies is called post-exposure prophylaxis or PEP. There have been no vaccine failures in the United States (i.e., someone developed rabies) when PEP was given promptly and appropriately after an exposure. Current vaccines are relatively painless and are given in your arm, like a flu or tetanus vaccine. Before traveling abroad, consult a health care provider, travel clinic, or health department about your risk of exposure to rabies and how to handle an exposure should it arise.