

Diseases Fact Sheet - Rabies

South Dakota Department of Health

Office of Disease Prevention Services - 605-773-3737 -(1-800-592-1861 in South Dakota only)

This material is provided for informational purposes only and is not a substitute for medical care. We are not able to answer personal medical questions. Please see your health care provider concerning appropriate care, treatment or other medical advice.

What is it?

Rabies is a viral disease affecting the central nervous system. It is transmitted from infected mammals to man and is invariably fatal once symptoms appear. Fortunately, only a few cases are reported each year in the United States.

Who gets rabies?

All warm-blooded mammals including man are susceptible to rabies.

How is rabies spread?

Rabies is almost always contracted by exposure to a rabid animal. The exposure is usually through a bite, but scratches and saliva contact with broken skin or mucus membranes are also possible routes.

What are the symptoms of rabies?

Early symptoms include irritability, headache, fever and sometimes itching or pain at the exposure site. The disease progresses to paralysis, spasms of the throat muscles, convulsions, delirium, and death.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

The incubation period is variable but is normally two to eight weeks. Incubation periods of over one year have been reported.

When and for how long is a person able to spread rabies?

Person-to-person transmission is extremely rare, however, precautions should be taken to prevent exposure to the saliva of the diseased person.

What is the treatment for rabies?

Treatment requires prompt scrubbing of the bite site, followed by the administration of rabies immune globulin (dosage dependent on weight) and four doses of human rabies vaccine administered in the arm on days 0, 3, 7, and 14 after the first vaccination.

What happens if rabies exposure goes untreated?

Exposure of man to a rabid animal does not always result in rabies. If preventive treatment is obtained promptly following a rabies exposure, most cases of rabies will be prevented. Untreated cases will invariably result in death.

What can be done to prevent the spread of rabies?

Exposure to rabies may be minimized by removing all stray dogs and cats, having all pets vaccinated, and staying away from all wild animals, especially those acting abnormally.