

## What is rabies?

Rabies is a fatal disease caused by a virus that attacks the nervous system. There are two common forms of rabies seen in animals. Animals with the “furious” form are unfriendly and aggressive, may attempt to bite various objects, and may salivate excessively. This is the form most commonly portrayed in movies. However, the paralytic or “dumb” form of rabies is more common. Wild animals with paralytic rabies are generally weak, uncoordinated, and may appear tame or approachable. Other signs of rabies include general changes in an animal’s behavior (such as a normally friendly pet becoming aggressive), problems swallowing or difficulty moving. An infected animal may seem to be unaware of its surroundings, unafraid of people and found out of its natural environment. Animals in the early stage of rabies may not show signs, but still be infectious.

In east Tennessee, skunks and bats have been the most commonly affected species in the past. With the recent discovery of the raccoon variant form of rabies virus, there may be an increase in the number of raccoons infected in Tennessee. Rabies virus is transmitted to pets or humans through the bite from an infected animal. Transmission is also possible if saliva from a rabid animal comes in contact with a break in the skin or with the mucous membranes of the eyes, mouth, or nose.

Rabies is preventable in pets. Keep your animals (dogs, cats, ferrets, horses and livestock) vaccinations current. Reduce the possibility of exposure to rabies by not letting pets roam free. Do not handle or transport wildlife, and do not keep wild animals as pets. Do not feed wild animals, and make your property less inviting by bringing in birdfeeders at night and waiting until the morning of trash collection to take cans to the curbside. Do not leave exposed garbage or pet food outside.

Parents should remind children that even if a wild animal or stray dog or cat appears approachable, do not go near it. If an animal is acting strangely, the county animal control office should be contacted. Call animal control to remove stray animals since they may be unvaccinated.

Immediate treatment for an animal bite or scratch is to wash the wound thoroughly with soap and water. The incident should be reported quickly to your doctor or local health department (215-5093 in Knoxville) for further advice to prevent bacterial infection or the possibility of infection with rabies virus.

This sheet was compiled using information from the CDC and AVMA.

[http://www.avma.org/communications/brochures/rabies/rabies\\_brochure.asp](http://www.avma.org/communications/brochures/rabies/rabies_brochure.asp)

**“ If your pet has been bitten by a stray or wild animal visit the American Veterinary Medical Association for recommendations. “**