

## **Rabies in Cats Fact Sheet**

1. **What is rabies?** - Rabies is a serious viral infection of the nervous system that affects only mammals. It is nearly always fatal, unless preventative medical treatment is given after an exposure. In almost all cases, once symptoms of rabies appear, no treatment is effective.
2. **What is the significance of rabid cats in Pennsylvania?**
  - a. Cats are the most common domestic animal to test positive for rabies in the United States. Nationally, reports of rabid cats outnumber reports of rabid dogs 4 to 1. Cats are also less likely to be vaccinated against rabies compared to dogs, which further increases their risk of developing rabies
  - b. Although rabies is much more common in wildlife such as raccoons, skunks and bats, cats hunt and, thereby, often find and eat incapacitated or dying wildlife that may be ill from rabies. Rabid cats are especially concerning because humans tend to have more direct and frequent physical contact with cats when compared to the others.
  - c. Rabid cats are an especially serious problem in Pennsylvania. From 2008 to 2010, Pennsylvania reported more rabid cats than any other state.
  - d. Most human exposures to rabid cats in Pennsylvania involved feral (free roaming or stray cats). Most often multiple persons, and in some cases also livestock, were bitten.
3. **How can I tell if a cat has rabies?**
  - a. Rabies can be confirmed only in a laboratory through examination of brain tissue. To do so, the animal has to be humanely euthanized.
  - b. In cats, classic symptoms of rabies include unusual behavior changes (sudden aggressive, friendly, or strange) followed by increased vocalization, loss of appetite, weakness, disorientation, paralysis, excessive saliva production resulting in drooling, seizures or even sudden death. Rabid cats do not always display all of these symptoms.
  - c. If a cat is infected after exposure to rabies, symptoms will not begin immediately. It could take anywhere from several days to several months before symptoms begin. However, a rabid cat is only able to spread rabies once it starts to show symptoms of illness.
4. **How is rabies spread?**

- a. The rabies virus is most often spread when infected saliva is transferred during a bite or scratch.
- b. Although much less common, rabies can also be transmitted if the saliva or brain tissue of a rabid animal comes in contact with open cuts or wounds in skin or with mucous membranes (e.g. the eyes, nose, or mouth).
- c. Rabies cannot be spread by petting or handling an animal, or by coming into contact with the animal's blood, urine or feces.

**5. What should I do if I am bitten or scratched by a cat?**

- a. A cat that bites or scratches a human should be captured, if possible to do so safely.
- b. If the involved cat is a pet, it should be observed for abnormal behavior for 10 days. If no abnormal behavior is observed during this time period, the cat would not have had rabies virus present in its saliva at the time of the bite or scratch and does not pose a rabies risk.
- c. If abnormal behavior or other illness is observed during the observation period, a veterinarian should be contacted immediately.
- d. A non- pet (feral animal) should be either captured and safely confined for 10 days; or captured, euthanized and the head submitted for rabies testing. If those options are not possible and the feral cat is easily identified and observed, feeding it for 10 days to assure that it remains healthy during that period may be another, although less desirable, alternative. Your local or state health department can assist with testing arrangements.
- e. A cat that cannot be verified as healthy and alive at 10 days after the bite or scratch, or that cannot be tested for rabies, should be considered to be rabid. The health department should be contacted for further medical guidance.
- f. All bites and scratches from cats, rabid or otherwise, pose a high risk of producing an infection in the victim. Therefore prompt wound care is important.
  - (1) The first step in bite care is to carefully wash the wound with soap and warm water.
  - (2) After wound care is accomplished, if exposure to a rabid cat cannot be ruled out, medical treatment should be urgently sought as post-exposure preventative treatment in humans is highly successful.
  - (3) The post-exposure preventative treatment usually consists of one dose of protective immunoglobulin (antibodies) and four doses of rabies vaccine administered over a two week period.

**6. How can I protect myself and my cats from rabies?**

- a. Cats three months of age or older are required to have a current rabies vaccination.
- b. Cat contact with wildlife should be reduced by:
  - (1) Feeding cats indoors
  - (2) Keeping cats inside at night
  - (3) Tightly covering garbage cans
  - (4) Closing openings in your garage, attic or porch that wildlife (bats, etc.) may enter.

**7. What can I do to help feral cats on my property or in my neighborhood?**

- a. The American Veterinary Medical Association estimates indicate that approximately 3,000,000 cats are kept as pets in Pennsylvania.
- b. The number of feral cats is very difficult to estimate but likely exceeds the number kept as pets. Therefore, feral cat control poses many public health challenges.
- c. The public can help reduce feral cat populations by capturing and sterilizing their free-roaming pets to keep them from having unwanted litters, and by not feeding or encouraging feral cats to live in, or near, humans.
- d. Persons that choose to feed feral cats (including persons that keep "barn cats") should take responsibility for these animals by periodically capturing, neutering and vaccinating them every three years against rabies.
- e. Since the Humane Society of the United States endorses trap-neuter-return (TNR) as a strategy for managing feral cat populations, there may be local humane organizations that can be contacted for help in addressing a feral cat colony.
- f. **For more information:** <http://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/diseases/rabies.htm>

This fact sheet provides general information. Please contact your physician and/or veterinarian for specific clinical information related to you or your animal.