

## I've been bitten. Do I need a rabies vaccine?

Rabies infection can be prevented by a rabies vaccine, even after a bite from an infected animal occurs. The vaccine consists of a series of four injections over two weeks, given into a muscle (not the stomach like was done in the past).

Rabies virus moves very slowly through the human body, ultimately making its way to the brain. It may take months, and even years, before the virus would reach your brain and cause symptoms.

In most cases the animal observation period is sufficient to rule out the need for the victim to receive the vaccine. However, there are certain situations in which the vaccine may be recommended to you by the Health Unit or your doctor.

- If the bite is to the head or neck, it may be recommended that you begin the vaccinations immediately, and then stop the vaccinations if the animal is confirmed to be healthy after observation.
- If the animal cannot be found to be placed in quarantine, it may be recommended that you receive the vaccine.
- If the animal is dead it can be tested for rabies, with lab test results usually returned within 48 hours. If it was discovered that the animal had rabies, which is unlikely, then the vaccines would be administered.
- If you get bitten on a hand, foot, arm or leg, there is ample time to observe an animal for 10 days, and provide vaccine if it is determined the animal had rabies.
  - If the animal gets sick or dies within the 10 days, the Health Unit must be notified immediately. In the event that this occurs, the animal's brain will be sent for testing and the Health Unit will recommend that the victim contact their doctor to discuss rabies vaccine.

**The ultimate decision as to the necessity for rabies vaccine rests with you and your doctor.**



**Under Ontario law, all cats and dogs over the age of three months in Norfolk and Haldimand Counties must have an up-to-date rabies immunization.**

**Failure to do so can result in a fine of \$85.00**

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**after**  
**bite!**

**Protecting animal bite victims from rabies**



While there has not been a confirmed case of a rabid cat or dog in Haldimand or Norfolk County since 1995, and no case of human rabies in a local resident has ever been reported, there is evidence that the rabies virus is still present in our area.

As recently as 2011, bats involved in local biting incidents have tested positive for rabies. A number of bats, and a few other animals, both wild and domestic, tested positive for rabies in 2012 in other parts of Ontario, including some neighbouring municipalities.

Although rabies is quite rare in our area, the disease is almost always deadly once symptoms appear. For this reason, the Haldimand-Norfolk Health Unit must continue to take precautions to protect the health of human animal bite victims and to prevent the spread of the rabies virus.



*There is no test that can be done on live animals to see if they have rabies. Only brain tissue can be tested, which can only come from a dead animal. This is why the biting animal is observed instead.*

## What happens after the bite occurs?

Rabies is transmitted through the saliva, so when an infected animal bites a victim the virus can be passed along. However, it is not always possible to determine if an animal has rabies just by observing the way it looks and behaves.

There is a period of time when an animal can have the rabies virus in its saliva but still look healthy.

Because of this fact, ALL bites should be reported.

When notified of a biting incident, health inspectors investigate to determine whether or not the animal was contagious with rabies when the bite occurred.

### When the biting animal is known

- In cases where the animal is known, the inspector will contact the animal's owner and place the animal under observation and quarantine for at least 10 days.
  - The quarantine requires the animal to be confined, usually at the owner's home, to limit its contact with people or animals while being observed.
  - This quarantine occurs regardless of the rabies vaccination status of the animal, as the vaccine is not 100% reliable.
  - The Health Unit does not order domestic animals euthanized or "put down" for testing if they are healthy and can be held in quarantine.

- If the rabies virus was in the animal's saliva at the time of the bite, it means the virus has already reached the animal's brain. Within three or four days the animal will begin to develop brain damage, and start to act strange or ill. The brain damage would lead to the death of the animal within the 10 day period.
- If the animal is alive, healthy and has not developed any rabies symptoms in the 10 day period then it did not have rabies in its saliva when the bite occurred, so rabies was not passed along to the person that was bit.
- At the end of the 10 day period, the inspector must visually see the animal to verify that it is healthy and alive, and if so the animal can be released.

### When the biting animal is wild, stray or unknown

- If the animal cannot be identified, located and assessed (such as a stray or a wild animal), the Health Unit will always recommend that the victim receive the rabies vaccine, just to be on the safe side.
- If it is a wild animal that has been captured, it may be euthanized and specimens sent for rabies testing.
- If you have been bitten or scratched by a bat, or if a bat landed on you, safely capture the bat, if possible. Contact the Health Unit to arrange to have the bat tested for rabies.
- If a bat was discovered in your home and there is a possibility that someone was bitten without knowing it, contact the Health Unit. The details about your situation will be reviewed by a health inspector, and they will provide you with a recommendation for what actions, if any, to take.



### My dog, Buster, bit someone and is now under quarantine. What should I look for?

Watch Buster to see if he displays a loss of appetite and a change in his behaviour - if he becomes aggressive or quiet. Changes of behaviour can include biting you or your family, or inanimate objects without reason. Buster might also display excessive salivation, changes to his bark, fear of water, and hind quarter paralysis with eventual death; all may be symptoms of a rabid animal. If Buster displays any of these symptoms while under quarantine, contact your veterinarian and notify the Haldimand-Norfolk Health Unit immediately.

