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## **TIPS EVERYONE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT RABIES**

Rabies is a deadly virus infection that can attack the central nervous system of most warm blooded animals, including humans. This summer, for a farm wife in Saline County who holds down two jobs, this topic is very close to her heart right now. Let me explain further.

The house she lives in recently received a make-over and with that new construction came an unexpected visitor in the middle of the night. She felt something just brush slightly around her cheek and didn't really think too much about it. The guest that night was a bat. The spouse took care of the bat and problem over, right? Wrong. It was the beginning of a big problem. Due to the bat's small size, any physical contact may constitute tooth (and saliva) exposure.

The important point to remember is as follows. Always, save the bat or animal in question if you can do so safely. Wildlife, especially skunks and bats, are the primary reservoir of rabies in our area. The virus is excreted in the saliva of rabid animals and is most commonly transmitted to others through bite wounds or when contaminated saliva contacts a fresh wound on the skin. The renter didn't think she was bit, but that didn't matter, it was the possibility of saliva exposure. With no sample, there is only one option, rabies shots each week for six weeks. Sixteen hundred dollars later (insurance paid some of this), the lesson learned is always save the animal for the rabies testing.

Wildlife with rabies are usually observed acting uncharacteristically. In other words, nocturnal animals (e.g. skunk and raccoon) become easily seen in daytime. They may exhibit uncoordinated movement - walk in circles, stagger, compulsive actions. They may aggressively chase people and pets, or act tame, sleepy, or paralyzed.

Dogs and cats develop progressive stages of abnormal behaviors. Initially, the animal may seek solitude, as well as display other non-specific changes in behavior. The muscles of the throat become paralyzed preventing eating or drinking. Saliva may drool out of the mouth (sometimes fooling people into believing a foreign object is caught in throat). Animals exhibiting the "furious" form of rabies may initially behave irritably and snap or bite at real or imaginary objects. Later, they may viciously and violently attack anything in their path.

Dogs may run for miles, cats may leap up and violently attack unsuspecting people. In later stages, paralysis is observed, usually beginning with the rear legs and progressing toward the head. Alternatively, in the paralytic or "dumb" form of rabies, animals appear drowsy with paralysis of the lower jaw, drooling, and a tendency to snap at movement. They are insensitive to pain and eventually become comatose.

Always thoroughly wash a wound with soap and hot water, then positively identify the biting animal and confine it, if you can do so safely. Contact your physician immediately for their recommendations. If the animal tests positive for rabies, or cannot be captured, then rabies post-exposure treatments are necessary.



Vaccinating pets against rabies protects them and also protects you from being exposed to rabies through them. Wear plastic gloves if you must handle your pets after a wildlife encounter. Rabies vaccine is also available for horses, cattle and sheep. If pets or livestock are acting strangely and drooling, they should be examined by a veterinarian. Don't put your bare hands in their mouths.

Stay clear of stray animals and avoid wildlife that act abnormally; report them to animal control authorities. Clean up piles of brush or debris that would provide attractive habitat for skunks and be careful not to attract them with food left out for pets. Health and Human Services data is showing rabies cases are on the increase again in Nebraska. For more information, go to [www.dhhs.ne.gov/srd/rabies06.htm](http://www.dhhs.ne.gov/srd/rabies06.htm) or do a Google search, "Rabies in Nebraska."

Randy Pryor, Extension Educator  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension in Saline County  
306 West 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, Wilber, NE 68465  
Phone (402) 821-2151 • Fax (402) 821-3398 • e-mail: [randy.pryor@unl.edu](mailto:randy.pryor@unl.edu)