Rabies Exposure Guidance for Veterinary Professionals

A rabies exposure is any **bite**, **scratch**†, or situation in which **saliva**, **cerebrospinal fluid**, **tears**, or **nervous tissue** from a suspect or known rabid animal enters an open wound or comes in contact with mucous membranes of another animal or person.

If a person is bitten or has an exposure to a potentially rabid animal, the exposure should be reported promptly to your county health department for follow up. General recommendations for animal and human exposure management are below.

Risk Assessment Questions

(Adapted from FloridaHealth.gov)

- Did the bite/scratch break the skin?
  - Bat bites may not be clearly visible on humans or animals.
  - Animal fur can hide minor bites or small punctures from animals other than bats.
- What is the animal's rabies vaccination status and rabies exposure risk? See chart below.
- Is the biting animal acting normally or does it appear sick?

Risk Assessment for Dog and Cat Victims

Biting Animal	Step 1	Step 2	Confinement
Outdoor dogs or ferrets exhibiting abnormal behavior or appear sick	Consult with the county health department to determine if testing is recommended.	If testing is recommended or if biting animal is not available for testing or observation, vaccinate victim animal against rabies.	45-day owner observation: If victim animal's rabies vaccination is up to date (or overdue and receives a prompt booster) 120-day quarantine: If victim animal's rabies vaccination status is unvaccinated or not known
Wild animals: raccoons, bats, foxes, bobcats, skunks, otters, outdoor or indoor/outdoor cats	Test biting animal, if available.	If positive results, or if biting animal fled, vaccinate victim animal against rabies.	
Healthy appearing dogs	Report to animal control.		None
Small rodents (rats, mice, squirrels) and healthy appearing opossums	Ensure pet is current on rabies vaccination.		None

Sick domestic species can sometimes be quarantined at a veterinary clinic and treated for other diseases for a day or two to rule out other causes of illness in consultation with the county health department.

If the animal victim is a horse or domestic livestock, consult with the county health department.

Florida Department of Health – St. Johns County
Rabies Program
200 San Sebastian View
St. Augustine, FL 32084
Main: 904-506-6081
Fax: 904-823-2380
https://stjohns.floridahealth.gov

Accredited Health Department
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Risk Assessment for Human Victims

Risk Category	Biting Animal	What To Do	
High Risk	Outdoor cats; wild animals: bats, raccoons, foxes, bobcats, skunks, otters	**Initiate PEP** unless animal can be tested promptly.	
Moderate Risk	Stray dogs, head/neck bites**	PEP may be initiated on case-by-case basis.	
Low Risk	Healthy appearing domestic animals: - Dogs (leash-walked, vaccinated dogs)*† - Cats (strictly indoor, vaccinated cats)* † - Ferrets and rabbits (housed indoors) - Small rodents (rats, squirrels) - Livestock including horses - Non-human primates (vaccinated and healthy appearing)	PEP rarely necessary.	Dogs and cats can be observed for 10 days.[1]
			Livestock can be observed for 14 days.
			Non-human primates can be observed for 14 days. (Veterinary assessment required at start and end of confinement period.)

*Owned *and* unvaccinated (or previously vaccinated) dogs and cats that are routinely supervised when outdoors and with no wildlife exposure have a low risk of being exposed to rabies.
† Nail scratches from healthy appearing dogs or healthy, vaccinated, strictly indoor cats with no contact with outdoor animals do not pose a rabies exposure risk.
**Rabies incubation period can be shorter for head/neck bites, call and report to the county health department immediately.

NOTE: If the biting animal is an owned dog or cat, and it is alive and healthy appearing 10 days following the bite to the human, the rabies exposure risk is eliminated.

Submit a Bite Report

Visit **https://stjohns.floridahealth.gov** to download the paper bite report. Fax paper reports to 904-823-2380. Florida statutes require that potential rabies exposures are reported to the county health department in all incidents where a human has been exposed to a suspect or known rabid animal. The county health department will follow up on all human and animal exposures to determine whether an animal will be observed for 10 days, tested, or if rabies post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) is recommended.

Rabies Testing

Animals that have exposed a person and **cannot** be monitored for 10 days must be approved for testing by the county health department. For healthy-appearing animals, please call before performing euthanasia, if possible. Domestic animals that are injured or sick can be euthanized to reduce suffering. Owned and vaccinated domestic dogs and cats that are injured or suffering from a known illness, please call the county health department to determine if rabies testing is needed.

For more information or questions, call 904-506-6081 or 904-506-6081, Option 6 for EPI and disease reporting after hours.

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