

RABIES IN BRITISH COLUMBIA WILDLIFE HEALTH FACT SHEET

Rabies is an infectious viral disease that affects the nervous system of humans and other mammals. It can potentially infect any mammal, but is most commonly seen in carnivorous species, both domestic and wild. In North America, different strains of the virus are present in bats, dogs, foxes, skunks and raccoons, depending on the geographic area. Insectivorous bats are the only wildlife reservoir of rabies in British Columbia, with sporadic cases occurring in other species. Since 1960, all rabies positive cases have been bats or an occasional spillover of bat rabies into a small number of terrestrial mammals. There have been no cases in domestic dogs or wild carnivores of any species.

The virus infects the nervous system and is primarily transmitted between animals by bite wounds carrying the virus in saliva, although in rare cases infections are suspected to have occurred through other means. Infection may be slow with signs occurring from over a week to over a month after exposure.

Rabies causes an infection of local tissues and spreads along nervous tissue to the brain and salivary glands. Animals infected by rabies exhibit typical signs with some minor variations. The disease usually begins with a change in behaviour which may mimic other illnesses or diseases. They usually stop eating and become quiet, retreating from contact. Following this phase of the disease, animals may become either very excited or aggressive with stimulation or constantly, followed by complete paralysis. The paralysis begins in the throat and jaw muscles, resulting in drooling and an inability to swallow. Paralysis usually progresses quickly to other parts of the body and, once signs appear, will eventually become fatal.

It is the aggressive or “furious” stage of rabies which presents the greatest danger to other animals and humans, since an animal affected in this way will behave in an irrational and vicious manner. They lose all normal fear and caution and may attack inanimate objects. Rabies is considered to be fatal without previous vaccination or immediate post exposure treatment. Prevention of the disease by vaccination of domestic pets is recommended in most areas. Consultation with a local veterinarian is strongly advised for current vaccination protocols in your area.

Wildlife acting in an abnormal manner should never be approached or handled by the public and only with caution by professional staff. Live animals demonstrating typical symptoms, as described above, should be killed without destroying the brain. The body or head should be handled carefully with gloves, reported to and submitted for examination by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. Diagnosis of rabies may only be made by examination of brain tissue by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency laboratory in Lethbridge, Alberta. Persons suspecting exposure should seek immediate advice from their doctor and local public health office.