

Mild winters have contributed to an increase in the skunk population in Perkins County and Southwest Nebraska.

A skunk who recently attacked a pet dog in rural Perkins County tested positive for rabies. After many years with few cases, many people have become complacent about this deadly disease.

What is Rabies?

Rabies is a deadly virus infection that can attack the central nervous system of most warm blooded animals, including humans.

The first recorded description of the disease dates from the 23rd century BC in Babylon. □

Rabid animals usually exhibit some form of abnormal behavior, which may differ according to species. Untreated, the disease is invariably fatal.

Rabies in Animals

- Nocturnal animals may be active in daytime.
- They may exhibit uncoordinated movement.
- They may aggressively chase people and pets, or act sleepy.
- Dogs and cats develop abnormal behaviors.
- Initially, the animal may seek solitude, as well as display other changes in behavior.
- The muscles of the throat become paralyzed, preventing eating or drinking.
- 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.
- Alternatively, in the paralytic or “dumb” form of rabies, animals appear drowsy with paralysis of the lower jaw.
- Livestock—Horses and pigs may bite viciously at any moving object or show drowsiness and paralysis like a stroke.
- Horses may show signs of colic and restless pacing.
- Animals may have frequent urination or sexual excitement. Cattle may have persistent straining to the point of rectal prolapse. Cattle may butt any moving object.

Transmission of Rabies

The virus is excreted in the saliva of rabid animals and is most commonly transmitted to others through bite wounds or contaminated saliva contacts a fresh wound on the skin or eye.

Infection is unlikely after virus exposure to unbroken skin or wounds over 24 hours old with a scab.

Common Sources

Wildlife, especially skunks and bats, are the primary reservoir of rabies. The striped skunk is frequently the source of rabies to livestock and pets.

Skunks are able to harbor the rabies virus in their bodies for extended periods without showing signs. Because skunks are highly susceptible to rabies, any skunk should be considered a possible source of the virus.

Rabies outbreaks are most common when skunk populations reach high numbers and the opportunity for transmission is greatest.

Dogs, cats, cattle, and horses have commonly been infected with rabies from wildlife and these domestic animals often expose people.

Brown bat bites are also a significant source of human exposure to rabies virus. Because a bat bite is small and easy to overlook, finding a bat in a room with a sleeping person, the elderly or

very young, or anyone unable to understand and communicate well should be considered a potential bite exposure.

How is Rabies Diagnosed?

The brain must be microscopically examined in a laboratory. It is especially important that the head (brain) of a suspected animal is not damaged when they are humanely killed.

A rabies vaccinated pet that bites someone or is suspected of rabies may be quarantined for 10 days instead of being humanely killed for rabies testing.

Dogs and cats die within 10 days of showing clinical signs of the disease; therefore, animals that remain healthy throughout this period do not have rabies.

What To Do If Bitten

First, thoroughly wash the wound with soap and hot water, then positively identify the biting animal and confine it, if you can do so safely.

Contact a physician immediately. If the animal tests positive for rabies, or cannot be captured, then rabies post-exposure treatments may be necessary.

This program consists of an injection of antibodies and five injections of rabies vaccine over a four-week period.

Rabies in humans is fatal without treatment.

How To Lower Chances

Vaccinating pets against rabies protects them and also their owners 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.

Don't put your bare hands in their mouths if showing symptoms. Stay clear of stray animals and avoid wildlife that act abnormally; report them.