

What animals are most likely to have rabies?

Only mammals can carry rabies. Traditionally, in Colorado, bats have been the main source of rabies infections. However, in recent years, the number of skunks testing positive for rabies has been rapidly increasing. These are now considered the main reservoirs or source for rabies within Colorado.

Whereas bats and skunks present the biggest concern for rabies, other mammals can be infected with rabies from these two sources. Thus, rabies has been found in foxes, occasionally in coyotes, raccoons, a mountain lion, and even a deer and a muskrat in Colorado. Domestic animals such as dogs, cats, cattle, and horses can become infected by being bitten by a rabid wild animal.

It is important to stress that not all wild animals have rabies. In fact, it is estimated that less than 1% of bats are infected with rabies. However, bats found on the ground are much more likely to carry rabies (5 – 18%).

How does an animal or person become infected with rabies?

Pets, livestock, and people can get rabies from animal bites or, rarely, from infected saliva getting into the eyes, nose, mouth or an open wound. Brain tissue can also be infectious and should not be handled.

What should I do if I am exposed to rabies?

Call your doctor without delay, and report the incident to your local health department. Effective vaccination for “treating” exposure is available if administered in a timely manner.

How do I know if an animal has rabies?

The first sign of rabies is usually a change in the animal’s behavior. Animals may act more aggressive or more tame than usual. Nocturnal animals like skunks, foxes and bats may be out during the day. Rabid animals may stagger, tremble, or seem weak. Bats may be found on the ground, unable to fly. Rabid animals may appear agitated and excited or paralyzed and frightened. Sometimes, rabid animals do not show any signs of illness before death from rabies. If a wild animal does not run away when you approach it, it may be sick or injured. Do not try to help it. If an animal is acting strangely, stay away from the animal and call your local animal control office or the Colorado Division of Wildlife. The only way to tell whether a wild animal has rabies is to test the brain. If a dog, cat, or ferret is alive 10 days after biting a person, the dog, cat, or ferret did not have rabies at the time of the bite.

Why are there concerns about skunks and rabies?

Rabies is a viral infection that affects the nervous system of mammals, including humans. The disease is almost always fatal to both people and animals. Skunk rabies spreads rapidly and infects large numbers of skunks. The disease often spreads to other wildlife and pets, making human exposure a real concern.



Why is skunk rabies such a concern? Hasn’t rabies been around in bats for hundreds of years?

Yes, this is absolutely true; bat rabies has been around for an extremely long time. Contact with bats is still hazardous, but humans and animals are much more likely to come into contact with skunks purely because of their location, on the ground. Because skunks may seek shelter and food where pets and livestock live, there is much more opportunity for the pets or livestock to interact with skunks.

How will I know if a skunk or bat has bitten one of my animals?

It is extremely difficult to see a bite from a bat, even on a human that knows where he or she was bitten. This is because the teeth of the bats are so small that they leave almost no mark behind, but are still able to transmit saliva and rabies virus through this contact. The teeth of skunks are also small enough that it may be difficult to tell whether a pet has been bitten, due to the pet’s fur and inability to say where it felt the bite. Any animal that is found unattended or in close contact with a skunk or bat is assumed to be at risk for rabies, unless rabies testing of the wild animal shows that it is negative.

What is the best way to avoid rabies?

Keeping your pets current on rabies vaccinations and avoiding contact with wildlife are the best ways to protect your family from rabies. Vaccination of animals by the animal owners will not be recognized by animal control or public health officials if your pet has contact with a suspect rabies wild animal. A veterinarian will ensure that your animal is properly vaccinated by keeping the vaccine at proper temperatures, ensuring your animal is old enough and healthy enough for vaccination, and will keep proper records.

Eight ways to protect yourself & your family:

- ✓ Do not feed, touch or adopt wild animals, and be cautious of stray dogs and cats. Rabid animals do not always appear vicious!
- ✓ Teach children to leave wildlife alone. Be sure your child knows to tell you if an animal bites or scratches them.
- ✓ Have your veterinarian (or local animal shelter) vaccinate your pets and livestock against rabies. Keep their vaccinations up-to-date.
- ✓ Tightly close garbage cans and feed bins. Open trash and feed bags attracts wild or stray animals to your home or yard.
- ✓ Feed your pets indoors; never leave pet food outside as this attracts wildlife.
- ✓ Keep outdoor pets in a fenced yard.
- ✓ Avoid all contact with bats, especially bats found on the ground. If you find a bat on the ground, don’t touch it. Report the bat and its location to your local animal control officer or health department.
- ✓ Promptly call your doctor for advice if an animal bites you. Contact your local health department to report the incident.



Which animals should I vaccinate against rabies?

Vaccinate all dogs, cats, pet ferrets, and mammalian livestock. Whereas dogs have traditionally been the focus of rabies vaccine campaigns, other domestic animals also get this fatal virus, which can put your family at risk. It is very strongly recommended to vaccinate all cats, because cats tend to come into contact with skunks.

If you own livestock such as cattle, goats and sheep, these should be vaccinated as well. Rabid skunks are typically not very cautious of these larger animals, and can bite and infect livestock while they are unattended. Reptiles and birds cannot be infected with rabies, and small rodents are unlikely to come into contact with wild bats or skunks, so such pets do not need to be vaccinated.

What will happen if my pet or livestock animal is bitten by a rabid skunk?

Animals that are kept up to date on rabies vaccination are given a “booster” rabies vaccination, and isolated at home for 45 days (if the animal can be properly confined at home). Unvaccinated pets or livestock that have had contact with a known or suspect rabid animal must be either euthanized OR placed in strict isolation from humans and other animals for a period of six months, at the expense of the owner. These requirements are designed to protect both the family of the pet/livestock owner and the community. Unfortunately, confining/isolating unvaccinated animals exposed to rabies is very stressful to the animal and expensive for the owner. Not vaccinating your animals puts your family at risk.



Should I trap skunks on my property & move them?

Never trap and relocate wildlife! It is illegal for the public to trap and relocate skunks, foxes, and many other types of wildlife in Colorado without a permit or other approval. Call the Colorado Division of Wildlife for information on permitted activities.



For more information contact:

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Skunks and Rabies

