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Rabies in pets, livestock and wildlife

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Boddicker, Major L./Rabies in pets, live

Major Boddicker^{1/}

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION SERVICE



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Quick Facts

- A change in an animal's behavior may indicate the presence of rabies.
- Handling of rabies suspects should be done according to rules which will help prevent spread of the disease.
- Suspected rabies specimens should be submitted for testing to the Colorado Department of Health.
- Proper care and handling of pets, livestock and wildlife can help prevent rabies.

Rabies is an acute contagious disease of warm-blooded animals caused by a virus and characterized by symptoms of mental disturbance, excitability, and paralysis, and usually ends in death. It is almost always transmitted by bites but may be introduced into an injury of the skin or the mouth through saliva. All warm-blooded animals are susceptible. Dogs, cats and skunks are most commonly infected in Colorado. Animals with rabies never recover, with the exception of bats, which can recover and become healthy carriers of rabies.

Recognizing First Symptoms

First symptoms usually are indicated by a change in the animal's normal behavior. It may appear sick, refuse to eat or drink, be very vocal or silent, be more restless, irritable or aggressive than usual, exhibit more affection than normal, exhibit poor vision and show excessive saliva, be paralyzed in some of its limbs or lower jaw. Wild animals, particularly skunks, may appear to have paralysis of the tail. In a wild animal, suspect rabies if it is abnormally aggressive, unafraid, or friendly in its behavior toward humans. *Do not try to diagnose the disease yourself.* Immediately notify a veterinarian or public health officer.

Handling Live Rabies Suspects

Suspect animals should be isolated in a locked cage or stall for at least 10 days and placed under supervision of a veterinarian. Only qualified persons who are feeding or observing

the animals should have access to the quarantine area.

Dogs should be leashed in the isolation room to facilitate safe feeding and observation. Chaining without isolation permits possible exposure of other animals, including humans. If possible, other pets should be isolated and caged.

Absence of symptoms during this 10-day period indicates that the animal probably does not have rabies.

When symptoms develop prior to the tenth day, the disease should be allowed to run its full course so that the animal dies.

If symptoms suggestive of rabies are noted on the tenth day, the quarantine should be continued.

Submitting Rabies Specimens

Animals suspected of having rabies that cannot be captured alive and held in isolation should be shot in such a manner that the brain is not damaged. A heart or lung shot is best. *Be sure the animal is dead.*

Always use rubber gloves in handling the specimens to avoid the possibility of contracting rabies.

Remove the head and seal it in a plastic bag or a glass container. If the brain has been punctured (shot) or the skull crushed, include a portion of the spinal column with the head. If the suspect is a large animal (livestock), the brain should be removed intact from the skull, refrigerated and packed for shipment as described below. Small animals such as bats may be submitted with the body intact, *but be sure the animal is dead* before enclosing it in the plastic bag or glass container. The specimen should be cooled promptly and kept cold but should not be frozen. It should be packed in a plastic or glass container, then placed into a larger water-tight metal container with cracked or shaved ice between the inner and outer containers. At least five parts ice to one part specimen should be used during shipment in the summer. Seal the can containing the refrigerator and specimen and label it with the proper address and include on the can:

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RUSH—RABIES SUSPECT—PERISHABLE
KEEP COOL

Animals Bitten by Rabid Animals

The Colorado Department of Health strongly recommends that any unvaccinated dogs or cats bitten by known rabid animals be immediately destroyed. If this cannot be accomplished, there are two acceptable alternatives: strict isolation of the animal in a kennel or pound for six months observation and vaccination one month before release from isolation, or isolation of the animal and consultation of a veterinarian for post-exposure treatment and vaccination. The animal must be confined during post-exposure treatment and for a period of three months following exposure.

Organized community effort is necessary for effective prevention and control of rabies. Regular immunization of pets is essential. The Colorado Department of Health can provide information on existing programs and development of new ones.

Reducing the Incidence of Rabies

If followed, these rules will help reduce the number of exposures, increase the chances of immediate diagnosis and lower the incidence of rabies:

- Don't chain rabies suspect where other animals or humans can be exposed. Chain the animal in an isolated room where it can be fed and observed by qualified persons.
- Don't explore the mouth or throat of a rabies suspect (livestock) with bare hands. Choke-like symptoms caused by paralysis of the throat muscles can be confused with a foreign object stuck in the throat.
- Don't handle a rabies suspect or specimen without proper precautions, such as using rubber gloves when removing the head or brain.
- Don't pick up live rodents or stray or injured pets. Wild animals or injured pets normally will bite to protect themselves.
- Don't remove live animals from traps without adequate protection.
- Don't keep pets without vaccinating them in accordance with directions from the local veterinarian or health officer.
- Don't allow skunks to live under farm buildings. Skunks are among the most susceptible to rabies of all animals.
- Don't ignore a wound if exposed to a suspected rabid animal. Consult a physician immediately.

If possible, the specimen should be delivered in person. If this cannot be done, it should be packed for express shipment either by air, rail or bus. *Under no circumstances should specimens be sent through the U.S. Mail.* Not only is this illegal, but the specimens usually are not received in satisfactory condition for laboratory examination.

A copy of the case history should be included with the specimen and it should be sent or delivered to:

Division of Laboratories
Colorado Department of Health
4210 East 11th Avenue
Denver, Colorado 80220
Phone: 320-8333, Ext. 3113

Information Needed in a Case History

The following should be included in a case history: date specimen is submitted to the laboratory; dates of first symptoms and death of the animal; description of symptoms and behavior of the rabies suspect; date of exposure, attack, or observation; location, number and severity of bites or scratches on persons exposed; and records of any previous vaccinations for rabies in the suspect or animals exposed. Circumstances surrounding human exposure also should be included. Was the attack provoked or unprovoked? Pet species, such as mice, hamsters and guinea pigs, are not normally accepted for diagnosis unless there are specific reasons to suspect rabies.

The following names and addresses should be listed: owner of the animal and land where the exposure occurred; persons exposed (and, if they are children, their parents); physician treating the person exposed; veterinarian in charge of the suspect animal; persons with animals exposed or suspected of being exposed.

The signature, title and address of the person filling out the report also should be included.

Specimens should be screened through local health officials and only those that have a significant history should be submitted. Laboratory examinations are costly.