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RABIES

What is rabies?

Rabies is a disease caused by a virus that attacks the brain. It can affect any warm-blooded animal, including dogs and humans. Although in a few rare cases people have survived rabies after significant intensive care, the disease is almost always fatal. In addition, most states require that animals suspected of having rabies are euthanized due to the significant risk of infection to the people around them.

What are the signs?

There are three stages of the disease. The first is the “prodromal” phase in which there is a marked change in temperament. The quiet dog becomes agitated, and the active dog becomes nervous or shy. Other signs include dilated pupils, excessive drooling, and snapping at imaginary objects. After 2-3 days, the second phase begins. It is called the “excitatory” phase. There is an exaggerated response to any stimulus. Dogs may experience bizarre changes in appetite including eating and swallowing sticks, stones, and other objects. The dog may roam aimlessly, inflict trauma upon itself, and have a change in voice. There will often be vicious, aggressive behavior, even towards its owner. Seizures may occur. Sometimes there is a third form, the “dumb” form, in which the dog becomes extremely depressed. Its mouth may gape open with the tongue protruding. A progressive paralysis sets in resulting in total body paralysis.

What happens next?

Ultimately, the dog dies

How do I know if a dog has rabies?

There are a number of diseases which can cause some of the signs of rabies. A few conditions can be very similar. Confirmation of rabies can only be made with special tests performed on brain tissue. This requires that the dog be euthanized and its head sent to a special diagnostic laboratory.

Can I catch rabies?

Yes. But rabies is only transmitted by the bite of a rabid animal to another mammal. But even then, the virus is present in saliva of the infected animal for a limited time. However, if you are bitten by any animal of which you do not know the rabies vaccination status, you should immediately wash the wound thoroughly with soap and water. Try to establish who owns the animal and whether the pet is currently vaccinated for rabies. In any case, seek the advice of your physician. Post-exposure rabies treatment with serum or vaccine may be recommended. This is very successful when begun quickly.

What wild animals are most likely to carry rabies?

All mammals can catch rabies, but some are more susceptible than others. Foxes, skunks, and raccoons are particularly prone to rabies, and one should be very careful if any wild animal seems overly approachable or

aggressive. Bats also commonly carry rabies, but due to their small size it can be difficult to establish if a bite has occurred. If you or any of your pets are exposed to a bat, post exposure vaccination for rabies may be recommended.

Should I get my dog vaccinated?

Absolutely. Rabies vaccines are very safe and very effective. In addition rabies vaccination is required by law in most states. All pets are required to be vaccinated, whether or not they spend time outdoors.