



Rabies

Understanding the habits and habitats of wildlife, and taking appropriate measures to prevent unwanted encounters, will help everyone to continue to enjoy the wonderful wild resources that still exist in New Jersey.

Often, people panic about rabies as a result of misleading media articles and folklore. It is vital to understand the facts about rabies, correct exaggerated fears, and know what sensible precautions you can take to prevent rabies exposure -such as vaccinating your companion animals and getting prompt post-exposure shots if you are bitten by a possibly rabid animal.

Given all the media attention, people are surprised to learn that very few people die from rabies nationwide each year. Human fatalities due to lightning strikes and bad hamburgers far exceed the number of human deaths due to rabies. This does not mean we should not be concerned about rabies. It means that we should take sensible precautions, use common sense, and calm down!

How Many Humans Have Died of Raccoon Rabies?

The answer, to everyone's surprise, is NONE. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has compiled statistics on the number and type of human rabies cases in the United States since 1980. Interestingly, most of the human rabies cases (2-3 annually) have resulted from a canine strain contracted overseas, or the bat strain. Most of the bat cases have been of the silver-haired bat strain, which is surprising because this species is rarely found in or around human houses.

Some Definitions

- **Bite Exposure** - Any penetration of the skin by the teeth of a rabid animal.
- **Non-bite Exposure** - Scratches, abrasions, open wounds, or mucous membranes contaminated with saliva or brain tissue from a rabid animal. Not sure if you have broken skin on your hands? Apply rubbing alcohol to see if and where it stings.

Some Commonly Asked Questions

- Q. Can I get rabies by sitting on the grass where a rabid animal drooled?**
- A. The virus cannot penetrate intact skin. People can only get rabies via a bite from a rabid animal or through scratches, abrasions, open wounds or mucous membranes contaminated with saliva or brain tissue from a rabid animal. In addition, the virus is short-lived when exposed to the open air and is no longer viable after saliva dries up. If you are handling a companion animal who has been in a fight with a potentially rabid animal, wear gloves to prevent contact with any still-fresh saliva.
- Q. Can rabies be spread through feces or blood?**
- A. Rabies is NOT transmitted through the blood, urine, or feces of an infected animal nor is it spread airborne through the open environment. Saliva is the primary way for an animal who is in the clinical stages of rabies to transmit the virus. For the rabies virus to get to the salivary glands, it has to travel first from the site of entry (usually a bite wound) through the animal's nervous system, then to the brain. This is what causes most rabid animals to exhibit abnormal behaviors, depending on what part of the brain is affected. Finally, the virus travels to the salivary glands during the terminal stage of rabies, about 4 to 10 days before death. An animal is most infectious in this latter stage of rabies because the virus is in the saliva.
- Q. Do a lot of bats carry rabies?**
- A. Actually, a very small percentage of bats carry rabies, approximately 1/4 of one percent of the population. However, if you suspect that a bat has bitten you, or if a bat is found in the room where a person is sleeping, contact your local health department for instructions.



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About Mercer County Wildlife Center

The Mercer County Wildlife Center is a state and federally licensed facility that cares for injured, ill and displaced wildlife. The Center provides these animals with the medical treatment and a temporary refuge before releasing them back into an appropriate wild habitat.

For more information regarding the work we do and the animals who share our environment, including a series of printable brochures that provide tips for coexisting peacefully with those animals, visit us online at:

www.mercercounty.org/departments/mercercounty-park-commission/wildlife-center

For information on protecting bee hives and livestock, contact the Division of Fish and Wildlife Wildlife Control Unit at (908) 735-8793.



Q. If a fox is running around during the day, is it rabid?

A. It is quite common to see foxes hunting by day. It is also normal for the kits to be seen playing by themselves, seeming to have no parents around and perhaps showing little fear of people. There is usually no need for intervention - soon the parents will appear and eventually the kits will learn to be wary of humans. You can bang pot tops together to help teach the kits to be fearful of people.

Q. What about young raccoons that are out during the day?

A. When young raccoons are orphaned, they do not know night from day - they only know that they are extremely hungry. This is when they tend to plunge out of trees. If the mother raccoon does not retrieve the young raccoon after several hours, call us. Do not touch the raccoon.

Q. OK, how about young skunks?

A. Skunks are very nearsighted, so a young skunk running around during the day has likely lost sight of its mother. An orphaned skunk will appear frantic. If the mother does not come within a couple of hours to retrieve it, call us.

Q. Is an opossum that is hissing and drooling rabid?

A. Opossums are amazingly resistant to rabies. Hissing, drooling, and swaying are part of the opossum's bluff routine to scare YOU off. Leave it alone and it will eventually wander off.

Q. I have seen woodchucks and squirrels circle and fall over--is it rabies?

A. Squirrels rarely get rabies; rabies in woodchucks is less rare. However, it is likely that what you have seen is the effect of the roundworm brain parasite, which causes neurologic signs that are mistaken for rabies. This behavior could also be a result of head trauma. Call us for advice.



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Dan Benson, *County Executive*

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