



## Public Health Fact Sheet

Boston Public Health Commission  
Communicable Disease Control  
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# Rabies

Mayor Thomas M. Menino

### What is rabies?

Rabies is a disease of animals and people. Rabies is caused by a virus that attacks the brain and nervous system. Once people get the virus, it spreads through the body and is fatal if not treated quickly. Rabies **can** be prevented by a vaccine. Prompt treatment will prevent people who come in contact with a rabid animal from getting rabies. Treatment involves 4 shots of rabies vaccine in the arm and one shot of Human Rabies Immune Globulin (HRIG) in the area of the bite or scratch.

### How is rabies spread?

The rabies virus is spread through the saliva (spit) of a rabid animal, usually because a rabid animal bites or scratches another person or animal. The virus may also get into the body through open cuts or wounds, or through the eyes, nose, or mouth.

### What animals can spread rabies?

Rabies is spread mostly by wild animals. In the United States and Canada, rabies is usually found in raccoons, skunks, foxes, coyotes, woodchucks, and bats. Domestic animals like dogs, cats, ferrets and farm animals can get rabies as well. This is why it's so important to vaccinate pets and livestock. Pets and stray dogs and cats can act like a bridge between wild animals and people, bringing rabies from wild animals into your home.

Any mammal (animals that have fur and are warm-blooded) can get rabies. Birds, fish, snakes, and amphibians do not carry rabies. Although it is possible for rodents to get the disease, animals like mice, rats, and squirrels almost never carry rabies.

## What can I do to prevent rabies?

- **Vaccinate your pets!** Cats, dogs, and ferrets all need to be vaccinated by a veterinarian regularly. Make sure their vaccinations are up-to-date.
- **Do not feed or handle wild animals.** Teach children that although a baby raccoon or skunk may look cute and friendly; it can be very dangerous.
- **Do not feed or touch stray animals, and avoid all sick or strange-acting animals.**
- **Cover your garbage cans, and don't leave pets' food outside where it can attract wild animals.**
- **Do not keep wild animals as pets.** Not only is this dangerous for you and the animal, it's also against the law.
- **Do not touch or pick up dead animals.**
- **Never handle a bat with bare hands.** Use thick gloves, tongs, or a shovel to remove the dead bat, or call bat-removal experts. Don't crush the bat with a tennis racquet or other object.
- **Do not let your pet play with bats.**
- **Keep bats out of the house or other buildings by closing or covering the attic or other dark sheltered areas. Put screens on windows.**

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## **What should I do if my pet or I am exposed to animal that might have rabies?**

**If you have been bitten, scratched, or exposed to an animal's saliva:**

- **Wash the wound right away with soap and water for ten minutes.**
- **Call your health care provider or BPHC Communicable Disease Control at 617-534-5611.**
- **Give a description of the animal that bit or scratched you.**
- **In Boston, call Animal Control at 617-635-5348 for assistance. The animal that bit or scratched you may have to be tested for rabies or quarantined.**

**If your pet has been bitten, scratched, or exposed to an animal's saliva:**

- **Try to find out what type of animal bit or scratched your pet. Do not touch the attacking animal.**
- **Use gloves or a hose to wash your pet's wound. Do not touch your pet with bare hands. There may be saliva from the rabid animal still on your pet, even if you don't see a bite or wound.**
- **Call your veterinarian.**
- **Call BPHC Communicable Disease Control to find out about how to protect yourself.**

**For more information call Boston Public Health Commission's  
Communicable Disease Control Division 617-534-5611**