Animal Bites and Rabies

1. REPORTING AND FOLLOW-UP

1.1 Purpose of Reporting and Surveillance

1. To assess the risk of rabies exposure in persons bitten or otherwise exposed to animal saliva, in order to recommend post-exposure rabies prophylaxis (PEP) to those who need it, and to provide counseling and reassurance to those who don't.

2. As necessary, to arrange for the capture and either confinement (10-day observation) of a live dog cat or ferret, or the laboratory examination of an animal head. This may involve coordination with other agencies, e.g., the Humane Society, county sanitarians, animal control, and local law enforcement.

1.2 Reporting Requirements

1. Anyone with knowledge of humans being bitten by potentially rabid animals (e.g., physicians, veterinarians, animal control personnel, law enforcement officials, or animal owners) is required to report such incidents to the LHD within one working day.

2. Any confirmed case of rabies in animals and any suspected or confirmed case of human rabies must be reported immediately (day or night) to the LHD, or — if LHD staff cannot be contacted — to OHA.

1.3 Local Health Department Reporting and Follow-Up Responsibilities

1. Whenever possible, animal bites should be investigated on the day of report.

2. Animal bite case reports should be entered electronically through “ORPHEUS” to the OHA Communicable Disease (CD) Section, Public Health Division, Oregon Health Authority. (Suspicions about human rabies cases should be phoned in immediately to 971-673-1111.)

3. Decisions about the disposition of animals which have bitten humans are the responsibility of the local health officer. CD Section disease epidemiologists are always available to consult on bite situations, and may make decisions under unusual circumstances or when local personnel are unavailable.

4. The Oregon State Public Health Laboratory (OSPHL) must be notified in advance of animal heads to be tested for rabies by calling 503-693-4100.

5. County or LHD personnel are responsible for the supervision of confined animals.

6. Any case of human rabies will be investigated by the local health department in cooperation with OHA epidemiologists and or Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

2. RABIES AND ITS EPIDEMIOLOGY

2.1 Etiologic Agent

The rabies virus, a member of the Rhabdovirus family.

2.2 Description of Illness

Rabid animals can show a range of symptoms, often described as either “dumb” or “furious” rabies; they may progress from one state to the other. Dumb rabies is characterized by reclusive behavior, drooling, anorexia, a startle response to sudden noise or light exposure, and irritation around the site of the bite, resulting in frequent licking and biting of the area. Furious rabies is marked by excitation and marked aggressiveness, notably biting of objects, animals, humans, or even self. Salivation is profuse and there is usually a change in voice. CNS signs of rabies may include an ascending paralysis, incoordination, convulsions and blindness. Wild animals often seem to lose their fear of people; nocturnal and crepuscular creatures may disport themselves during daylight hours. Infected bats may act strangely: crawling around, hissing, etc.

It is important to remember that these signs and behaviors are not pathognomonic for rabies. Behavioral changes and clinical signs caused by a variety of infectious and non-infectious processes (e.g., pesticide exposure, heavy metal poisoning, trauma) can mimic those associated with rabies. Human rabies is not unlike rabies in other mammals. Prodromal symptoms include parasthesias, notably at or near the site of the
3.1 Was there a Human Exposure?
Rabies virus does not penetrate intact skin or clothing. Thus, unless there is a history of a bite that broke the skin, or saliva contact with broken skin or mucous membranes (including the eyes), there was no exposure. Those who merely pet a dog or pick up a bat later found to be rabid, for example, have not had a significant exposure. If there was no exposure, then there is no risk.

3.2 Is there a Significant Risk the Animal was Rabid and Secretting Virus?
This question can be answered by a combination of knowledge about the natural history of rabies in Oregon, the circumstances of the exposure, knowledge and observation of the offending animal (if possible), and (sometimes) laboratory testing. A healthy dose of common sense is helpful, too. If there is no significant risk that the animal in question was secreting rabies virus, then it is a no risk exposure.
4. CONFINEMENT AND HEAD TESTING

4.1 Confinement
To avoid needless euthanasia of pets—and to minimize the considerable expense of animal testing—confinement and observation (sometimes misleadingly referred to as “quarantine”) is the preferred follow-up for dogs and cats that have bitten people. Such animals should never be killed if they can be held under observation, preferably at the owner’s expense. Without the approval of local health officials, veterinarians and others are prohibited from killing possibly rabid animals that have bitten someone (OAR 333-019-0024 and 0027).

If a dog, cat or ferret appears healthy and is eating and drinking normally 10 days after a bite occurred, there is no chance that rabies transmission occurred. Should an animal that has been confined following a bite develop any signs of neurological/CNS disease, however, it should be killed immediately and the head submitted for testing. Such symptoms include: hind leg paralysis, ataxic movement, seizures, unusual voice sounds, blindness, inability to swallow, and persistent dilation of pupils. The mechanics of confinement are left to the discretion of the LHD. Confinement may be at a country animal pound or a local humane society. At the discretion of the LHD, responsible owners may be allowed to confine low-risk dogs or cats on their own premises.

4.2 Head Testing
The OSPHL must be notified in advance (503-693-4100) of all heads being submitted for testing. Advise them of the mode of transportation and expected time of arrival for all specimens. Outside regular business hours, contact the on-call epidemiologist (971-673-1111).

1. Lab Schedule
Low Risk: Heads from low risk situations are batched twice a week (currently on Mondays and Wednesdays; earlier if there is a Thursday or Friday holiday). Specimens for the batch run should arrive at the lab by noon on Wednesday—or later by special arrangement.

High Risk: Express tests for high risk situations are run as needed, with results available within 36 hours. Express testing can be expensive (air freight charges, etc.), so be sure you are dealing with a high-risk situation and not just a hysterical citizen. Contact the OSPHL (or, if unavailable, the on-call epidemiologist) immediately to coordinate arrangements for express testing.

The main point of express testing is to save the patient some or all of the cost of unnecessary PERP. Coordinating the transportation of heads to the lab is often the most important step in assuring a satisfactory and timely result. Transportation alternatives include air freight, drive-in to the lab (by the person bitten, the animal owner, or a county employee, for example), bus service, or same- or next-day courier service (FedEx, Express Mail, etc.). Your local hospital or medical lab is another potential source of information about emergency specimen transportation options. Health departments that are outside the Portland area should investigate these alternatives before the need arises. Collect the relevant information (route schedules, fees, payment options, phone numbers, etc.) and keep it current and available to the appropriate personnel.

No risk: “No risk” heads are not run at the OSPHL.

2. Specimen Handling and Shipping
Animals should be killed by lethal injection, gas or other means that do not damage the brain and that do not place people at risk of further exposure. Heads received in poor condition (e.g., riddled with bullet holes, frozen, or decomposed) often cannot be satisfactorily tested. Send animal heads only (whole bats are acceptable). Caution should be exercised when decapitating animals—remember; the working assumption should be that the animal is rabid. Wear heavy gloves, and use goggles or a face shield to avoid splashing brain/CNS tissue into the eyes or mouth—if only for aesthetic reasons.

Pack the head in a leak-proof container and seal it with tape. If plastic bags are used, use at least two and make sure they are sealed. The sealed head should go into another leak-proof container with enough cold packs to maintain refrigerator temperatures until the specimen reaches the lab.

Please Do Not Freeze Animal Heads To Be Tested for Rabies. Dry ice is not recommended, as it may freeze the head. Label the outside of the container with “REFRIGERATED SPECIMEN” and include the lab’s phone number (503-693-4100) and a notation to “CALL ON ARRIVAL.” Containers must be shipped prepaid, and addressed to:

Animal Bites and Rabies
Containers must be shipped prepaid, and addressed to:
Oregon State Public Health Laboratory
3150 229th Ave., Ste. 100
Hillsboro, OR 97124
Oregon State University
Oregon Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory
30th & Washington Way
Magnulator Hall, Room 134
Corvallis, OR 97339

3. Reporting of Results
The OSPHL will notify the LHD of all test results. Positive tests will also be reported to the Communicable Disease Section. It is the responsibility of the LHD to communicate results to the person bitten and other interested parties (docs, vets, etc.). For high risk situations, make sure you know how to contact these persons promptly.

4.3 Veterinary Diagnostics Laboratory (VDL)
For a fee the Oregon State University Veterinary Diagnosis Laboratory (OSUVDL) in Corvallis will test animal heads for rabies. This alternative can be suggested to persons who are not satisfied with the determination that theirs is a “no risk” situation. Generally speaking, VDL will not test animals that have bitten people without the prior approval of Communicable Disease Section epidemiologists, but this approval is readily obtained for no risk situations.

Specimen preparation and shipping is best left to interested parties and/or their veterinarians. Requirements are similar to those outlined above for the OSPHL. Questions should be referred to the VDL.

5. PROPHYLAXIS

5.1 Wound Treatment
All bite wounds should be thoroughly and immediately washed with soap, water and copious flushing. Betadine® or similar disinfectants can be applied. If possible, the wound should be left open to heal. Animal bite wounds often become infected (especially cat bites), and may require antibiotic therapy. Check tetanus immunization status, and provide a booster to persons who are out of date. Patients should be encouraged to seek medical attention promptly should signs of wound infection occur.

5.2 Post-Exposure Rabies Prophylaxis (PERP)
LHD and OHA staff can only make recommendations to patients and physicians about the advisability of PERP. Rabies immune globulin (RIG) and rabies vaccine are freely available by prescription, and physicians are free to take or leave our advice. For many lay persons (and not a few physicians), the prospect of PERP conjures up images of dozens of painful injections with giant needles, often in the “stomach.” Understandably, these may contribute to the natural anxiety felt by many people after animal bites, and should be quickly debunked. Modern PERP is a simple, extremely effective, and relatively painless procedure, albeit not cheap.

PERP can be given by anyone capable of giving IM injections; there is no good reason for patients being dispatched to distant emergency rooms. Therapy consists of passive immunization with rabies immune globulin (RIG, Imogam®, 20 IU/kg), given as soon as possible after exposure; combined with active immunization with human diploid cell vaccine (HDCV), purified chick embryo cell vaccine (PCEC) or rabies vaccine absorbed (RVA) administered in 1-ml doses on four days (days 0, 3, 7, 14).

These biologics are stocked at some local county health departments, hospital pharmacies and several emergency rooms in Oregon; they can be ordered for next-day delivery at most locations. As many as 50% of vaccines may experience local reactions including pain, erythema, and swelling or itching at the injection site, and/or systemic reactions such as headache, nausea, abdominal pain, myalgias, and dizziness. PERP should not be interrupted or discontinued because of side effects short of anaphylactic reaction. Pregnancy is not a contraindication.
5.3 Pre-Exposure (Human)

Persons who live in an area with a high rate of terrestrial rabies and are at risk of being bitten or exposed to infected tissues (e.g., veterinarians, wildlife workers, laboratory personnel, animal control officers) may benefit from pre-exposure rabies prophylaxis. The regimen consists of three doses of HDCV (IM or ID) on days 0, 7, and 28. Should immunized persons subsequently be bitten by a possibly rabid animal, they will need only two 1-ml boosters of HDCV, three days apart.

5.4 Rabies Vaccine for Animals

There are formulations of rabies vaccine licensed for cats, dogs, and ferrets, as well as horses, cows, sheep, and goats. Oregon laws require that dogs be vaccinated for rabies by the time they reach 6 months of age. (This vaccination is required for licensure in all Oregon counties.) Dogs that are immunized at ≤1 year of age must be revaccinated within the following year, and every 3 years thereafter: While there is no requirement for cat vaccination in Oregon (except in Multnomah County), it is highly recommended, because cats are bat predators. The schedule for cats is the same as for dogs. Only a 1-year vaccine is approved for ferrets.

6. FOLLOW-UP TO ANIMAL RABIES CASES: BAT-PROOFING

6.1 Seizing the “Teachable Moment”

Publicity surrounding the identification of a rabid animal often provides an opportunity to educate citizens about the importance of ongoing animal control measures, including the following recommendations:

1. Avoid physical contact with bats — healthy, sick, alive, or dead. Bats are an important and interesting part of the natural world, providing many benefits (such as insect control). That said, there are ways to have bats around without necessarily having them in your house (see below).
2. Do not hand feed or otherwise handle stray animals and wildlife.
3. Report all animal bites promptly to the local health department.
4. Every effort should be made to capture stray or wild animals that have bitten people, if it can be done safely, in order that they can tested for rabies if indicated.
5. Vaccinate all dogs and cats, in order to create an immune barrier between these frequently handled animals and wildlife.
6. Control populations of stray or unwanted animals.

6.2 Animals Exposed to Known or Suspected Rabid Animals

1. Unimmunized dogs, or cats with known contact with a rabid animal, the bitten animal should be humanely euthanized. If the owner will not permit this, the animal must undergo a supervised quarantine for 4 months, with vaccine administered as soon as quarantine starts. Unimmunized ferrets should be quarantined for 6 months.
2. A dog, cat, or ferret with a current rabies vaccination that has had a known contact with a rabid animal should be revaccinated and confined at home for 45 days (indoors, in a fenced yard, or on a leash at all times).

In late 2004 or 2005, Oregon OARS 333-019-0027 was amended to bring Oregon rules in line with the National Association of Public Health Veterinarians and CDC guidelines (contained in the Compendium).

6.3 Bat Control

1. Houses and other buildings can be bat-proofed by covering large openings with screen wire and caulking or closing holes to less than 1 cm (3/8 in.) in diameter. Doors and windows should be screened. Fireplace dampers should be closed during warm months.
2. For those interested in encouraging bat colonies, bat boxes are easily constructed (plans are available from various sources). They should be located away from human habitations.
3. With care, bats can be removed safely from a dwelling. Wait for the bat to settle on a reasonably flat surface, and trap it under a wide-mouthed jar or can. Use a piece of cardboard as a temporary cover. Turn the bat loose in another location or if sick or injured humane euthanasia should be used; gas anesthesia, 4% CO, or CO2. Please note that putting the jar or can in the freezer is not considered to be humane euthanasia.

7. MANAGING SPECIAL SITUATIONS

7.1 Curious Animal Behavior

Rabies is only one of many conditions that can affect animal behavior. Trauma, pesticide and other poisonings, and infectious diseases can all trigger rabies-like signs. Unless humans are bitten by these animals, there should be no public health concern about rabies.

7.2 Wildlife Die-offs

Local Health Departments are often called because of an animal die-off (real or perceived—usually the latter). These seldom have public health significance, and are best handled by contacting the nearest area office of the Department of Fish and Wildlife. Their staff is well versed on the ecology of the area and are trained in these investigations.

7.3 Suspected Human Rabies

Contact the Communicable Disease Section immediately. Antemortem confirmation of human rabies is often not possible. Nuchal skin biopsies, corneal impression smears, neutralizing antibody titers and other tests on human material must by performed at the CDC by arrangement through OSPHL. Postmortem testing is the same as for other animals.

UPDATE LOG

March 2011: Clarified language (overall); Updated ACIP recommendation on the number of rabies vaccines required for post exposure prophylaxis and updated time of vaccination when animals are quarantined for 6 months (animal to animal rabies exposure). (Emilio DeBess)
June 2014: Updated human vaccine information. (Emilio DeBess)
Jan 2015: Animal bites and rabies positive animals and human are reportable condition and should be entered into the Orpheus database. (Emilio DeBess)
July 2017: Updated Section 6.2 Quarantine and link to Compendium (Emilio DeBess)