

Rabies

This deadly disease can cause severe illness and death in humans. The most effective way to prevent your cat from contracting rabies is vaccination.

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Rabies is an ancient viral disease of humans and animals. All warm-blooded animals can be infected, but the susceptibility of species varies widely.

In other parts of the world, dogs are the primary vector of human rabies. In the United States, widespread rabies vaccination programs for dogs have made them a less frequent source of transmission. Less stringent rabies regulation for cats and ineffective control of strays have made the cat the most commonly infected companion animal in the United States.

Rabies spreads among susceptible mammals by contact with infected saliva, usually through a bite by a carrier animal. Exposure to saliva through any break in the skin will also transmit the disease. The time from exposure to the time a cat shows symptoms may be as long as six months.

A number of effective rabies vaccines are available for cats. Because rabies poses a potential public health hazard, most areas have laws that dictate when and how frequently the vaccine must be administered. Ask your veterinarian about the laws in your area.

The rabies virus attacks the brain and central nervous system, causing changes in temperament, most notably aggression. Initially, an infected cat may show a marked change in behavior. This prodromal stage typically lasts about one day. Outgoing cats may hide, and shy cats may become friendly. Any unusual behavior is possible.

The next phase, called the furious stage, lasts one to four days. Unpredictably vicious behavior, generalized muscular twitching, irritability, hoarse voice, excessive salivation and weakness may be present. Paralysis quickly follows the furious stage and may last one to four days prior to death.

Although postexposure vaccines are available for humans, this therapy is not an option for your cat. If your cat develops rabies, it will die. If you are exposed and do not receive the postexposure vaccines, you may die, too.