

Animal Bites

Fact Sheet

Why should we be concerned?

Rabies is a preventable viral disease of mammals most often transmitted through the bite of a rabid animal. The virus infects the central nervous system, causing encephalopathy and, ultimately, death.



What happens when an animal bite occurs?

When an animal bite incident occurs, the St. Mary's County Sheriff's Department carries out the initial investigation. The animal owner is instructed to begin a required ten-day quarantine period for their domestic animal. The Sheriff's Department then forwards the bite report to the Health Department for follow-up. Environmental Health case management involves the health status of the animal involved in a biting incident. After the initial quarantine period ends, a sanitarian follows up to make sure that the biting animal is still healthy and, therefore, not a rabies risk. Owners of unvaccinated pets are instructed to arrange for rabies vaccinations and to provide verification of their compliance. If an animal dies before the end of its quarantine period, it must be collected by the Environmental Health office and submitted for testing at the State Laboratory. Any wild animal involved in a bite incident with either a human or a domestic animal must be euthanized and submitted to the lab for testing. The test either confirms exposure or clears the bite victim from exposure to rabies.

A vaccinated domestic animal that is exposed to a known or suspected rabid animal must be held in quarantine for 45 days. An unvaccinated domestic animal exposed to a known or suspected rabid animal must be held in strict double enclosure quarantine for six months or humanely euthanized.

What are some tips for preventing rabies exposure?

- Be sure each cat and dog has up-to-date rabies vaccinations! In St. Mary's County, all dogs and cats at four months of age and older are required to be vaccinated against rabies. Vaccines are available for cats and dogs; animals over one year of age are protected for three years.
- Keep your animals in your home or yard and walk them on a leash. St. Mary's County law requires dogs to be leashed when they are off their owner's property, and all dogs must be licensed.
- Teach children to never approach or touch a wild animal or other animals that they do not know. Even a neighbor's pet should be approached with caution. They should ask the animal's owner if it is all right to pet their dog or cat. Almost any animal will attack if threatened or cornered. Children should be taught to avoid strange animals even if they appear friendly.
- Never try to coax a wild animal to eat from your hand! Tell children to report any bite, scratch, or contact with a strange or wild animal.
- Make sure your house and yard are unattractive to wild animals. Feed pets inside the house. Keep garbage in tightly closed trash cans, and do not set trash cans out the night before the trash is to be collected unless the lid can be secured.

For more information:

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