

Rabies: What every traveller needs to know



Rabies is one of the most deadly diseases known to man.

It is caused by a virus that attacks the nervous system, and once symptoms appear, rabies is almost always fatal. Any warm-blooded mammal can be infected by rabies and can transmit the infection to humans.

Domestic or feral (wild) dogs are the most common source of rabies in humans in Asia, Africa and Latin America. In North America and Europe the disease is mainly confined to wild animals (particularly bats, raccoons, foxes, coyote, and skunks).

You can catch rabies when the saliva of an infected animal is introduced into your body. This is usually through a bite, but there have been occasions when infected saliva has entered the body via a mucous membrane (eyes, nose or mouth), or via a wound or scratch as the result of being licked.

How common is rabies?

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), over three billion people are at risk of catching rabies in at least 150 countries and territories. Every year over 15 million people worldwide receive treatment after a suspected exposure to rabies, and there are estimated to be around 50,000 to 60,000 human deaths from rabies annually, most of which occur in Asia and Africa.

Your risk of rabies exposure when travelling depends on the nature of your journey and the types of activities you will be undertaking. Most rabies exposures during travel are from a dog bite.

How do you know if you will be at risk?

Talk to your doctor or nurse about your travel plans.

You might be at particular risk if:

- you are going to a high risk area
- you live or travel (frequently or for long periods) to countries with a risk of rabies
- you are travelling to remote areas with limited access to medical care, even for a short period of time
- you intend to take part in activities such as cycling and running, which can attract the attention of animals
- you intend to work with animals.

Prevention

Before you go:

Book an appointment with your nurse or doctor for a pre-travel consultation at least 6 weeks before you are due to travel.

- a vaccine is available for travellers who are considered to be at risk of rabies. Your healthcare provider will be able to talk to you about your risk of rabies and any other disease risks in your chosen destination
- note that receiving rabies vaccine prior to travel does not eliminate the need for a medical evaluation if you are exposed to a possibly rabid animal during your trip. Urgent medical advice should always be sought following any possible exposure to rabies; additional doses of rabies vaccine may be needed
- you can help to ensure you receive the correct treatment after a possible exposure to rabies by keeping a record of your rabies vaccinations with you at all times whilst you are travelling. It is important to show this to the doctor or nurse treating you after any potential rabies exposure.

For future trips booster doses may be recommended, so check with your practice nurse or doctor before travelling overseas.

What if you don't get vaccinated before travelling?

If you do not have rabies vaccination before travelling, you may need more intensive treatment in the event of a potential exposure to rabies, including a treatment called immunoglobulin, which will be followed by some doses of the rabies vaccine.

Rabies immunoglobulin is vital for immediate protection but it can be hard to obtain in some countries. In such cases you may need to quickly travel to a nearby country or home to the UK for immediate treatment.

While you are there:

What can you do to protect yourself?

Follow the advice below:

- avoid contact with wild and domestic animals
- do not approach animals or attempt to pick up an unusually tame animal or one that appears to be unwell
- do not attract stray animals by offering food or by being careless with litter
- be aware that certain activities can attract dogs (e.g. running, cycling)
- be aware that children are at higher risk of rabies as they are less likely to avoid contact with animals or report a lick or bite.

If you are bitten, scratched, or licked on an open wound (such as a cut or a patch of eczema) or mucous membrane (eyes, nose or mouth) you must seek medical attention immediately.

NEVER think that a wound is so small it can't be a risk. If the skin is broken then the virus may be able to enter.

What should you do if you are exposed to rabies?

Remember, this is an emergency: seek medical advice without delay, even if you had the rabies vaccine before you travelled.

- immediately flush the wound with plenty of soap or detergent under running tap water for at least 15 minutes
- do not scrub the wound
- if possible apply an iodine solution or neat alcohol (40-70%)
- do not cover the wound or apply a pressure dressing
- wash any animal saliva from your face immediately with plenty of water to stop it from getting into your eyes, nose or mouth
- seek urgent medical attention without delay (even if you have had a course of rabies vaccine previously). You might also need antibiotics to prevent the wound becoming infected.

Further information for travellers regarding rabies is available from:

Public Health England (PHE)

<http://www.hpa.org.uk/Topics/InfectiousDiseases/InfectionsAZ/Rabies/>

National Travel Health Network and Centre (NaTHNaC)

<http://www.nathnac.org/travel/factsheets/rabies1.htm>

Global Alliance for Rabies Control (GARC)

<http://rabiesalliance.org/rabies/>

World Health Organization (WHO)

<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs099/en/>

This leaflet has been prepared by Sanofi Pasteur MSD to give you general information on issues relating to healthy travel. It is not meant as an alternative to individual advice and should be used in conjunction with advice provided for you by a health care professional.

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