

Department of Biomedical and Diagnostic Sciences

Rabies Prevention in Tennessee: What Animal Owners and the Public Need to Know

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Recent rabies exposures involving goats highlight important lessons about vaccination, wildlife exposure and protecting people and animals. Recent reports of goats exposed to rabies after contact with wildlife and subsequent interaction with members of the public have raised understandable questions among animal owners, producers and veterinarians: Which animals are required to be vaccinated? Can livestock such as goats be vaccinated? How long can an animal carry rabies before becoming sick? And what should a person do after contact with a potentially rabid animal?

These questions are particularly important for animals that are routinely transported, housed outdoors or brought into contact with the public. Rabies is a viral disease of mammals that affects the central nervous system. Once clinical disease develops, rabies is almost invariably fatal. However, rabies is preventable through appropriate vaccination, reducing opportunities for wildlife exposure and prompt evaluation following a potential exposure.

What Animals Are Required to be Vaccinated in Tennessee?

Tennessee law requires dogs and cats to be vaccinated against rabies beginning at 12 weeks of age and by 6 months of age. Rabies vaccination is not routinely required by Tennessee law for livestock such as goats, sheep, cattle or horses. However, **legally required does not mean that vaccination is unavailable or inappropriate.**

Rabies vaccines are licensed for use in several domestic animal species, including certain livestock. When a rabies vaccine is not specifically licensed for a particular species, veterinarians may also consider appropriate extralabel use under veterinary oversight. For example, although there is not a rabies vaccine specifically licensed for goats, a veterinarian may consider an appropriately licensed rabies vaccine for another species for extralabel use in an individual goat.

National recommendations for animals used in public-contact settings specifically encourage consultation with a veterinarian about extralabel rabies vaccination when no licensed vaccine exists for the species. However, **an extralabel vaccination is not the same as having a vaccine licensed for that species.** Extralabel vaccination may provide protection and reduce the likelihood of rabies transmission, but it does not necessarily provide the same regulatory assurance as vaccination with a product labeled for that species.

For livestock owners, the appropriate vaccination strategy should, therefore, be discussed with the animal's veterinarian, taking into consideration the animal's species, age, health, likelihood of wildlife exposure and whether it will have contact with the public.

Public-contact Animals Require Additional Planning

Animals used in petting zoos, educational programs, fairs, festivals and other public-contact settings have a different risk profile from animals that remain on a private farm. National public-health recommendations state that mammals in public settings should be kept in a manner that reduces exposure to wildlife that can serve as rabies reservoirs and should be kept current on rabies vaccination according to recommendations for the species. When unvaccinated mammals are going to have contact with the public, vaccination should occur at least one month before that contact whenever possible.

This timing matters because rabies vaccination is a preventive measure—it is not a substitute for preventing an animal from being exposed to rabies immediately before an event. Animals that are too young to be vaccinated require additional consideration. National guidance recommends that mammals too young to be vaccinated only be used in exhibit settings when additional measures are in place to reduce the risk of rabies exposure.

For any animal that will regularly interact with the public, owners should have a plan for:

- Appropriate vaccination before public contact.
- Preventing wildlife access to animal housing and enclosures.
- Avoiding contact between domestic animals and wildlife.
- Monitoring animals for illness.
- Documenting vaccination and veterinary care.
- Establishing a plan for responding to a suspected wildlife exposure

Wildlife Exposure Is a Critical Part of Rabies Prevention

Vaccination is only one part of rabies prevention. Preventing exposure to wildlife is equally important. In Tennessee and throughout much of the United States, rabies is maintained in wildlife populations. Wildlife species commonly associated with rabies include skunks, raccoons, bats and foxes.

For livestock owners, reducing opportunities for wildlife contact can include:

- Securing livestock housing and fencing where practical.
- Preventing wildlife from accessing feed and water.
- Removing carcasses and other attractants promptly.

- Avoiding contact between livestock and wildlife.
- Monitoring for evidence of wildlife entering animal enclosures.
- Contacting a veterinarian or appropriate animal-health authorities if livestock may have been exposed to a potentially rabid animal.

A particularly important point for producers is that a healthy-looking animal may have been exposed before anyone realizes an exposure occurred.

How Long Does It Take Rabies to Develop?

Rabies does not necessarily cause immediate illness after exposure. The time between exposure and the development of clinical disease—the incubation period—can vary substantially. In people, incubation is generally measured in weeks to months, although the interval can vary depending on factors including the location and severity of the exposure. This prolonged incubation period is one reason rabies prevention cannot rely on simply watching an animal for a few days after a suspected exposure.

In Tennessee, there is no established observation period for domestic animals other than dogs, cats and ferrets. When livestock or another domestic species is involved in a potential rabies exposure, public health officials should be consulted. The animal's health and vaccination status, the circumstances of the exposure and the epidemiology of rabies in the area are considered when determining appropriate management.

Bats Deserve Special Attention

For people, one of the most important rabies messages is simple: **You may not know that a bat has bitten you.** Bat bites can be extremely small and may not leave an obvious wound. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends immediate assessment for rabies-related care after direct contact with a bat unless a bite or scratch can be definitively ruled out. People should never handle a bat with their bare hands.

If a bat is found inside a home or in another location where a person or pet may have had contact with it, do not simply release the bat. Contact local animal control or the local health department for guidance about safely capturing the bat and determining whether it should be submitted for rabies testing. This is particularly important when the person who may have been exposed is a young child, was asleep, or otherwise may not be able to reliably determine whether direct contact occurred.

What About Skunks, Raccoons and Foxes?

Unlike bats, bites from terrestrial wildlife such as skunks, raccoons and foxes are often more obvious—but they should still be treated seriously. CDC identifies bats, raccoons, skunks and foxes among the wildlife species most frequently associated with rabies in the United States.

An unprovoked attack, unusual behavior or neurologic abnormalities in a wild mammal should increase concern, but **an animal does not have to appear obviously sick for an exposure to warrant evaluation.**

If a person is bitten or scratched by a potentially rabid wild animal, the animal should not be handled by an untrained person. Contact local animal control and the local health department for instructions regarding the animal and the person's exposure.

What Should You Do After Possible Exposure?

If you or a family member has been bitten or scratched by a potentially rabid animal:

1. Wash the wound immediately. Thoroughly wash the wound with soap and water for 15 minutes. This is an important first step in reducing the risk of infection.
2. Contact your healthcare provider and local health department promptly. Do not wait for symptoms to develop. A public-health professional can assess the circumstances of the exposure and determine whether rabies post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) is indicated.
3. Do not attempt to capture or handle potentially rabid wildlife yourself. If the animal is available, public health or animal-control personnel can provide instructions regarding safe capture and testing.
4. Tell healthcare and public-health personnel what happened. Important information includes the animal species, whether the animal was wild or domestic, how contact occurred, where the contact occurred and whether the animal is available for testing.

Rabies PEP for people who have not previously been vaccinated includes wound care, human rabies immune globulin and a four-dose rabies vaccine series for most immunocompetent individuals. PEP is highly effective when administered before symptoms develop.

Prevention Starts Before an Exposure

For livestock producers and owners of animals that interact with the public, rabies prevention is best approached as a risk-management strategy rather than a single vaccination decision.

Work with your veterinarian to determine whether vaccination is appropriate for your animals, particularly when they are regularly exposed to the public or have opportunities for contact with wildlife. Make sure animal housing and enclosures limit wildlife access and establish a plan for what to do if an exposure occurs.

For people, the most important steps are to avoid handling wildlife, recognize that bat exposures may be difficult to identify and seek medical or public-health advice promptly after a potential exposure.

Rabies is almost always fatal once clinical disease develops—but it is preventable when appropriate precautions and post-exposure measures are taken before symptoms begin.

Additional Resources

Tennessee residents with questions about potential rabies exposures should contact their local health department or animal control agency. Tennessee Department of Health maintains current rabies education, reporting and post-exposure guidance through its rabies program.

Animal owners should consult their veterinarian regarding rabies vaccination and exposure management for livestock, companion animals and animals used in public-contact settings.



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