Rabies Vaccine
Information Sheet

What is rabies?
Rabies is a serious infection caused by a virus that affects the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord). The virus can occur in wild and domestic animals including bats, cats, coyotes, dogs, ferrets, foxes, raccoons, skunks and wolves. It can infect any mammal.

How is rabies spread?
Rabies virus is found in the saliva of an infected animal and can be passed to humans through a bite, scratch or a lick on an open wound.

What are the symptoms of rabies?
Early symptoms of rabies may include:
• headache
• fever
• numbness at the site of the bite or scratch
• irritability
• a sense of worry
Symptoms can begin anytime from a few days to years following exposure, depending on the site of the bite and the severity of the wound.
The disease progresses quickly to confusion, seizures, paralysis and death.
There is no treatment for rabies disease and it is almost always fatal once symptoms begin.

How can rabies be prevented?
Rabies can be prevented by getting the rabies vaccine. It can also be prevented by early treatment if you have been bitten, scratched or licked by an animal that may have rabies infection.

Is the vaccine safe?
Yes. In Canada, vaccines must undergo laboratory and field testing. They must pass a strict licensing procedure with the federal government before they can be used. Once the vaccine has been approved for use, every lot is tested for safety and quality. A person cannot get rabies disease from the rabies vaccine that is used in Alberta and Canada.

Who should get the vaccine?
Rabies vaccine is recommended pre-exposure for individuals who have an occupational risk for rabies disease. This includes:
• workers caring for animals such as veterinarians, veterinary health technicians, veterinary assistants, Humane Society/SPCA workers
• animal research workers, including rabies laboratory workers and those in other laboratories working with rabies-prone species
• animal control workers, including bylaw officers, dog pound workers and zoo workers
• wildlife workers, including fish and wildlife workers, foresters
• spelunkers involved in work-related spelunking
Rabies vaccine may be given to individuals following a possible exposure to the rabies virus.
Who should not get the vaccine?
Pre-exposure rabies vaccine should not be given to people who:
- have a history of severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) to rabies vaccine
- have had a severe reaction to this vaccine or any component of the vaccine

Because rabies disease is almost always fatal, there is no contraindication to giving rabies vaccine to an individual following a possible exposure to the rabies virus.

What are the possible side effects to the vaccine?
Most people have no reaction to the rabies vaccine. Reactions that do happen are usually mild and occur within 6 to 12 hours after the immunization and commonly disappear within 24 to 48 hours. Possible reactions include:
- Swelling, redness, pain and itching where the vaccine was given
- Fever, headache, body aches
- Nausea, abdominal pain and dizziness

As with any immunization, unexpected or unusual side effects can happen. This includes severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis).

What should you do if you have a reaction to the vaccine?
- Apply a cool moist cloth on the area where the needle was given to reduce the pain and swelling
- Take a medication such as acetaminophen (e.g., Tylenol®) to reduce the pain
  - Aspirin® (ASA) is not recommended for individuals under 19 years of age
- Report any unusual reactions to Health Link Alberta

For health advice and information 24 hours a day, seven days a week, call Health Link Alberta at:
- 403-943-5465 in Calgary
- 780-408-5465 in Edmonton
- Toll free 1-866-408-5465 elsewhere in Alberta

Or visit www.MyHealth.Alberta.ca for information online.

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