What is Rabies and Australian Bat Lyssavirus?

Rabies virus and the Australian Bat Lyssavirus (ABL) are in the same virus family and can cause fatal disease in humans.

Rabies is a disease that primarily affects animals that bite and scratch. While it occurs in much of Asia, Americas, Europe and Africa, Australia is currently rabies-free.

ABL was first identified in Australia in 1996 and is a virus that is closely related to rabies. It rarely infects humans and is spread by bats. Only two cases of human ABL infection have been reported in Australia, both of which resulted in death.

What are the symptoms?

Rabies and ABL cause very similar symptoms. These include headache, fever, tiredness, tingling at the site of the bite or scratch, agitation, a dislike of fresh air and water, weakness, delirium, convulsions and coma. Death usually follows several days after the onset of symptoms.

The time from exposure to the virus to the development of symptoms varies. It can range from as short as a week to, on rare occasions, several years. The most usual time is 30-90 days after being bitten or scratched by an infected animal. Once people develop symptoms they almost always die.

How do people become infected?

Both rabies and ABL are spread from the saliva of infected animals to people or other animals through bites or scratches. You cannot get rabies by petting an animal but you can get rabies if the infected animal was licking its paw before it scratched you.

While many rabid animals will look sick, or behave abnormally, some may appear well.

Overseas, animals that carry rabies include: dogs, foxes, jackals, cats, bats, raccoons, skunks, monkeys and other animals that can bite and scratch. Infected dogs remain the highest risk for human transmission.

In Australia, both the larger flying foxes (or fruit bats) and the smaller insectivorous (micro) bats have been found to carry ABL.

How is it prevented?

It is recommended that you avoid all contact with animals overseas and all bats, both flying foxes and insectivorous bats in Australia.

If you are bitten or scratched by a bat in Australia, or by a wild animal overseas:

- Thoroughly wash the wound immediately with soap and water for at least five minutes. Proper cleansing of the wound is the single most effective way to reduce transmission of the virus. Apply an antiseptic solution (eg. povidone-iodine) after washing if possible.
- Exposed mucous membranes such as eyes, nose or mouth should be flushed well with water.
- Seek medical attention as soon as possible to care for the wound, and to assess whether you might be at risk of infection.

Pre-exposure vaccination

Rabies vaccine helps prevent both rabies and ABL infection. Pre-exposure vaccination is recommended for anyone who regularly handles or cares for bats in Australia (bat carers, wildlife officers, vets etc) or people who will be spending prolonged periods (ie more than one month) in rabies endemic areas. The course involves three rabies vaccine injections, given over one month. The vaccine does not offer protection until after the third dose is given and is available on prescription.
Post exposure vaccination

Even if you have not been vaccinated, a post-exposure course of rabies vaccine, and another injection called rabies immunoglobulin (RIG), can prevent infection. In the ACT, post-exposure vaccine and RIG are provided free because of the seriousness of the disease. It is important that post-exposure treatment and vaccination is given as soon as possible after exposure to be most effective.

If you have received pre-exposure vaccination you will still need some extra doses of vaccine after a bite or scratch from a potentially infected animal.

People who have been bitten or scratched by a bat or an animal from a rabies endemic country can access free post-exposure vaccine and RIG via ACT Health through their GP.

How is it treated?

There is no treatment for rabies and ABL once the symptoms have commenced, however treatment of infected people before they develop symptoms can be highly effective. In all potential exposures to rabies or ABL (bites, scratches, mucous membrane exposures), seek medical advice immediately, even if you have been vaccinated.

Need more information?

For more information about rabies and ABL, contact your doctor or call the Health Protection Service, Communicable Disease Control Information Line during business hours on (02) 6205 2155.

Communicable Disease Control Section at Health Protection Service is responsible for the investigation and surveillance of notifiable or infectious conditions in the ACT in order to control or prevent their spread in the community. This includes the promotion of immunisation, education and other strategies that help to limit the spread of diseases.

Rabies and Australian Bat Lyssavirus are notifiable diseases.

Acknowledgements


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