

RABIES IN NEW YORK: WHAT VETERINARIANS NEED TO KNOW

Veterinarians play an important role in rabies prevention. To report animal bites and for any questions about rabies, [contact your local health department \(LHD\)](#).



What should I do if a dog, cat, or ferret has bitten a person?

All animal bites should be reported to the LHD where the bite occurred. With LHD approval, animals showing clinical signs consistent with rabies should be immediately euthanized and tested for rabies.

A healthy dog, cat, or ferret that has bitten a person should be confined and observed for 10 days, under the direction of the LHD, regardless of its vaccination status. If signs suggestive of rabies develop during this time, the animal should be euthanized and tested for rabies after consultation with the LHD. This ensures the person who was bitten receives prompt postexposure prophylaxis if the animal is positive for rabies.

If an animal is being euthanized for any reason and has bitten a person in the last 10 days, it should be submitted for rabies testing, regardless of its vaccination status. This includes animals that bite owners or staff during euthanasia.

Generally, it is not recommended to vaccinate an animal for rabies during the 10-day observation period to avoid confusion of signs of rabies with rare adverse vaccine reactions. Ultimately, the decision to give rabies vaccine during the observation period should be based on the veterinarian's clinical judgment, potentially factoring in the likelihood of future opportunities to vaccinate the animal.

What should I do if a patient has been bitten by a wild mammal?

If a dog, cat, or ferret has been bitten by a wild mammal, including a raccoon, skunk, fox, or bat, report the bite to the LHD where the animal resides. *This includes stray animals found with wounds of unknown origin.* The LHD will help to evaluate if the animal may have been exposed to rabies, determine next steps, and coordinate testing for the biting animal, if it is available to test.

Immediately clean the animal's wounds and give a rabies booster vaccination. Additionally:

- If the animal was not up to date on rabies vaccination or does not receive a rabies booster within 5 days of being exposed, it must be quarantined for 6 months per New York State law. The LHD will establish the quarantine restrictions.
- If a dog or cat has a history of rabies vaccination without adequate documentation, it may be possible to determine prior vaccination through demonstration of an anamnestic response to booster vaccination. This process is known as prospective serologic monitoring, and it needs to be initiated with guidance from the LHD *before* the animal receives a booster vaccination.

If signs suggestive of rabies develop during quarantine, the exposed animal should be euthanized and tested for rabies after consultation with the LHD.

Who can administer a rabies vaccination to a domesticated animal?

The rabies vaccination may only be given by a licensed veterinarian or a licensed veterinary technician (LVT), **provided** the LVT is working under the supervision of the veterinarian. This means that the LVT may only give a rabies vaccination if the supervising veterinarian is on the premises at the time that the vaccination is given. All rabies certificates must be signed by a licensed veterinarian. By signing the rabies certificate, the veterinarian certifies that the vaccination was given properly and that the information on the animal and vaccine is correct.



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When is a dog, cat, or ferret considered up-to-date on rabies vaccination?

Under New York State law, a dog, cat, or ferret is considered current on rabies vaccination starting 14 days after primary vaccination (i.e., the animal's first dose) and ending one year after primary vaccination. An animal is considered currently vaccinated immediately after any subsequent booster vaccination for the duration of the vaccine (i.e., one year for a one-year vaccine, three years for a three-year vaccine), *even if the animal's rabies vaccination has lapsed at the time that it receives its booster vaccination*. There are no laboratory or epidemiological data to support the annual or biannual administration of three-year vaccines after the completion of the initial vaccine series. Note that rabies titers **cannot** be used as a substitute for evidence of current vaccination.

I am preparing an animal for rabies testing. How do I protect myself and my staff?

If an animal is being euthanized and prepped for rabies testing, assume that the animal is rabid and protect yourself and your staff from possible exposure. This will help avoid the need for postexposure prophylaxis if the animal subsequently tests positive. While handling and euthanizing the animal and during specimen preparation:

- Limit the number of personnel who handle the animal. Only staff members who have received preexposure prophylaxis should handle the animal and be present for specimen preparation.
- Wear personal protective equipment (PPE) while euthanizing animals suspected to be rabid:
 - Gloves
 - Face and eye protection (either face shield or mask and goggles)
- Wear PPE during decapitation and specimen packaging:
 - Gloves
 - Protective clothing (coveralls, waterproof apron, or gown)
 - Face and eye protection (either face shield or mask and goggles)
 - Fit tested N95 mask, if using a band saw
- Document any bites or other possible exposures and report them to your LHD right away.

Can the lab test specimens that have been frozen?

Ideally, specimens should not be frozen before being shipped to the lab for rabies testing. Frozen specimens must be thawed at the lab, which can delay testing. However, previously frozen specimens are still valid for testing; freezing a specimen does not compromise the test.

An animal was found dead or was buried, and I'm not sure if it's too decomposed to test. What should I do?

Sometimes specimens look very decomposed and still contain brain tissue that is satisfactory for testing. When in doubt, ship the specimen to the lab so that lab staff can determine if testable tissue is present.

What should I know about shipping specimens to the lab?

- **Always** ensure the LHD has approved testing before shipping a specimen to the lab.
- **Always** get a tracking number in case the specimen does not arrive at the lab when expected.
- **Always** follow the specific instructions from the LHD including how to pack the specimen and which type of delivery to request (e.g., "overnight delivery").
- If you are in the Albany area and the LHD has approved testing, rabies specimens may also be dropped off at the lab at any time. Specimens can be left with security, who are present 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- Lab address: Griffin Laboratory, NYS Department of Health, 5668 State Farm Road, Slingerlands, NY 12159



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