

The disease

Rabies is an acute, fatal disease caused by a virus. It is spread most commonly by the bite of an infected mammal mostly dogs, but licks of an open wound or scratches are also ways the virus can enter the body since the virus is transmitted in the saliva of the animal. Tens of millions of human exposures and tens of thousands of deaths may occur every year.

All mammals are believed to be susceptible however dogs account for 95% of infections, however there are differing species variations in different regions so that all travellers with mammal bites should be evaluated. The disease is so dangerous because it migrates to the nervous system and once any symptoms develop death is always inevitable. After infection the incubation period can range from a few weeks to several months even years.

Dogs account for 95% of infections along with cats, bats and monkeys which are responsible for most other infections.

Where is it found?

Rabies is found on all continents except Antarctica. It is most commonly found in Africa, Asia, Central & South America where there are many stray street dogs. India accounts for nearly 40% of all deaths. Treatment is with palliative and supportive care

Prevention

Rabies is best prevented by having a course of vaccinations preferably a few weeks before you leave. Course consists of 3 vaccinations over a period of 21 to 28 days coupled with education on the need to avoid animal bites, treatment of the wound and that further post exposure vaccinations are required.

FAQ's about rabies risks and actions

What if I did not have pre-exposure course before leaving and get bitten?

This is the most often asked question. If you are not able to catch the animal and have it tested for rabies then you must assume it was rabid and it is vital that you seek medical treatment as fast as possible. You will need to follow procedure about cleansing the wound and most urgently getting rabies vaccine and RIG. RIG is short for rabies immunoglobulin which is the blood protein the body makes after vaccination. This is extracted from donors who have had the rabies vaccine and have donated their blood.

But a) it may not be available locally and b) it may have been derived from unscreened blood sources – not a good idea!

What is the actual risk of an incident and is it worth having the rabies course?

This is difficult to assess, it depends on the time spent in the endemic country, the type of travel and generally avoiding contact with animals generally mammals. If you are careful and minimise any contact the risk is fairly low. It is obvious the longer you spend in the country the greater the risk.

Having the pre-course vaccination reduces the stress and panic of an incident. Most travellers spending 28 days or more, especially gap year, long term, adventurous travellers chose to have the pre-exposure course. The one thing to remember is if you have an incident which breaks the skin or you get licked on an open wound (mosquito) or get spat at by a defending monkey and its saliva gets into your eyes, you must do something. Rabies can linger for a long time in your body (latest case 19 years) and you would need to get checked out as soon as possible. If there is a scar or you can remember the site you will receive post incident treatment, even if you are back in this country. Don't wait for any symptoms to develop.

What do I do if I get bitten having completed the pre-exposure course?

It is important to wash the wound thoroughly and then apply alcohol (vodka) over the wound then head to the nearest clinic to get 2 further shots of rabies vaccine to be given 2-3 days apart – rabies vaccine is widely available all over the world. This should be done as soon as possible.

I am leaving in less than a week. Is there any point in getting just 1 dose?

As soon as you receive a vaccination your body remembers the shape and structure of that protein and will start to mount a response in the event of an incident. *(Consultants in US advise against this course of action suggesting it complicates any post exposure treatments- however we consider it is probably the best way forward.)* So, ONE dose is probably better than none.

It would be advisable to obtain the rest of the course from a safe reliable clinic where you might be in 7 & 21 days after the first. But do check your clinic and be aware that there have been reports of fake rabies vaccine. We can offer advice concerning reliable clinics who are members of our international society.

How can you tell if an animal is carrying the disease?

In a nutshell you generally cant. Unless it is displaying obvious characteristics – foaming mouth and staring eyes you may not be able to tell. It may be feeling unwell but lying quietly until disturbed.

What are the symptoms of rabies?

Typical symptoms are anxiety, paralysis, spasms of the swallowing muscles, hydrophobia (fear of water) – do you really want to know since once symptoms develop rabies is always fatal.

What's the point of pre-exposure when you need to get the vaccine afterwards anyway?

This is a common question. Once you have had a pre-exposure course your body starts to fight the viral invasion following an incident immediately. To get maximum protection you will require further reminders in the shape of further post incident shots.

What is the serum that gets put directly into the wound?

This is the rabies immunoglobulin (RIG) previously mentioned. **If available** it will be given alongside further rabies vaccine shots to give maximum protection. If RIG is not available promptly it can be administered later but only up to 7 days after the incident.

I am told they sometimes use horse serum. Could this cause an allergic reaction?

When human rabies serum (HRIG) is unavailable horse RIG has been used. It is better to use this than no RIG at all. However there is a greater risk of a serious reaction with non-human sources.

We are going on a safari, can you get rabies from a lion?

Theoretically yes, but if you get bitten by a lion the last thing you want to worry about is rabies!

If I have the pre-exposure course, how long does the basic protection last?

Following a pre-exposure rabies course, the normal traveller with infrequent exposure to rabies can expect to have protection for about 10yrs, after which a booster dose may be recommended if further exposure is anticipated.

I have seen the vaccine offered at a much lower price. ID administration?

This is a complicated question and needs to be discussed at a consultation.

How much does it cost?

A pre-exposure course purchased at the time of the first dose costs £158. Purchased one at a time the cost is £56 per dose