



Rabies testing in domestic mammals (pets, horses, and livestock) FAQs

- 1) What are the signs of rabies? Rabies can mimic many disease conditions; therefore there is no single sign or symptom of rabies. Rabies is a possibility in any mammal that exhibits a behavioral change, gait abnormality, weakness or paralysis, or any other sign caused by problems with the nervous system.
- 2) My animal is properly vaccinated against rabies; doesn't that guarantee that it won't get rabies? While vaccination works to protect animals most of the time, it is not 100% effective. Occasionally an animal contracts rabies even though it has been properly vaccinated. Therefore, vaccination does not guarantee protection.
- 3) Can I get rabies from my pet animal or livestock? Yes. All mammals are capable of contracting rabies and all animals that have rabies are capable of transmitting rabies to people. Even on the rare occasion that a vaccinated animal contracts rabies, that animal can transmit the rabies virus to people. Birds, reptiles, amphibians, and fish cannot contract rabies and therefore are no risk to people as a source of rabies.
- 4) How do I know if my animal has rabies? Rabies can only be confirmed by laboratory testing. When an animal dies or is euthanized very accurate tests are available. The testing of an animal that has died or has been euthanized is the only way that rabies is accurately and definitively diagnosed. There is no testing that can accurately diagnose rabies in a living animal.
- 5) How do I get my animal tested? Your veterinarian is obligated to report any animal that is possibly infected with rabies to state health officials, even if the actual likelihood of rabies is very low. The veterinarian or state officials will collect the necessary samples to test for rabies.
- 6) What samples will be tested? The rabies test requires that brain tissue be tested. Rabies primarily infects the brain, so that is the tissue that needs to be submitted to the lab. Unfortunately, collecting the brain for testing requires that the animal be decapitated.
- 7) Why is it necessary to test? It is necessary to test any animal that dies or is euthanized that could potentially have transmitted rabies to people or other animals. Testing will determine whether an exposure to rabies occurred, and if so, preventive treatments for people can begin. There are no preventive treatments for animals, so other measures, like quarantine, may be necessary. The consequences of not testing an animal that does have rabies could mean that exposed people or animals would die.

- 8) *Can rabies be treated?* No. Rabies is considered universally fatal. Every year approximately 50,000 people worldwide die from rabies. Rabies can be prevented by identifying positive animals through testing and starting preventive treatments on people who were exposed to positive animals. Rabies deaths in the United States average about 3 per year. It is rare in this country because state health officials are very diligent about testing animals that potentially expose people and then initiating preventive treatment.
- 9) *If my animal is vaccinated will that mean that he/she will not need to be tested if he/she develops signs that are consistent with rabies?* Because rabies can mimic many other diseases, because vaccination is not 100% effective in prevention of rabies, and because rabies is always fatal in humans and animals that contract the disease your animal may still need to undergo testing even if it is currently vaccinated. Public health officials are sensitive to the fact that collection of samples for rabies testing can be upsetting to the owner of an animal but the risk of failing to test could potentially result in the death of people or other animals.
- 10) *If my animal will still need to be tested for rabies, why bother getting him/her vaccinated?* In the case of a dog, cat, or ferret it is the law that they are properly vaccinated against rabies. In the case of cattle, sheep, and horses, it is the law that they are vaccinated against rabies if they have any public contact. For those animals that aren't required by law to be vaccinated it is still a good idea because vaccination accomplishes two things. It protects the animal that is vaccinated from getting rabies almost 100% of the time, and, it also protects the people who handle these animals daily because they are unlikely to transmit rabies to them.
- 11) *Will I have to pay for testing?* No, as long as the testing is authorized by your municipal animal control officer, the state veterinarian, or the Department of Health the testing will be done at no charge to you.
- 12) *If testing is done can I get my animal's head back to bury with the other remains?* Generally yes. If the animal is tested and found to be negative the head can be returned to the owner for burial as long as that request is clearly made at the time the animal's head is submitted for testing. If the animal is positive for rabies the head is considered infectious and therefore will be safely disposed of by the lab. All requests for return must be made at the time of specimen submission and you will need to make arrangements to pick up any specimen at the lab.
- 13) *If my animal needs to be tested, who is responsible for transport of the specimen to the lab?* Proper and safe handling of the specimen is imperative. Therefore, unless explicit directions are given otherwise by a state public health official, the specimen will be transported to the lab by the animal control officer or a state public health or law enforcement official.