



Rabies is a very serious disease, killing more than 30,000 people around the world each year. There are few reported cases of recovery from confirmed infection. If you plan to take your pet abroad then they will need protection against this deadly disease.

What is rabies?

Rabies is an invariably fatal viral infection that is extremely rare in the UK. The virus is passed from animal to animal via the saliva. There are no documented cases of disease being passed from one human to another. The last case of classical rabies caught in the UK was in 1902 and since 1946 there have only been 22 deaths in the UK from rabies acquired abroad. Rabies is still a serious problem in most countries of the world with the exception of Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific Isles, Scandinavia (excluding Denmark), Iceland, the West Indies and Atlantic Islands.

In Europe and the United States, infection persists mainly in wild animals, for example foxes, bats, racoons and wolves, and humans are infected from contact with such animals. In contrast, in India and other Asian/African countries infection commonly occurs in dogs and cats associated with humans.

What are the signs of rabies?

After an animal has been infected with the virus the signs of rabies usually develop within 2-8 weeks. Occasionally the development of signs may be delayed for months or years. The interval between infection and development of signs depends to some extent on the site of the bite. Signs tend to develop more rapidly following bites around the face.

The illness starts gradually with fever, headache and numbness around the wound. As the virus spreads to involve the brain, personality changes may develop. Subsequently the illness progresses to spasms, weakness and paralysis.

Two broad types of rabies are described: 'furious' rabies (in 8 out of 10 patients) where there is extreme agitation 'dumb' rabies where the individual is quiet, withdrawn and eventually unrousable. Animals with rabies show changes in behaviour. In most animals this results in aggressive behaviour and even shy animals will become bold and likely to attack. Hydrophobia or intense fear of water is seen exclusively in rabies. Within a few days, paralysis develops and death occurs due to paralysis of the muscles of breathing.

When will my pet be at risk?

Pets living in the UK are not at risk from rabies as they are unlikely ever to come into contact with the disease. Until recently importation of dogs and cats into the British Isles required a period of 6 months quarantine. Rabies vaccination of pets resident in the UK was not allowed. The introduction of the Pet Travel Scheme (PETS) resulted in relaxation of the requirement for quarantine for pets entering the UK via certain routes from specified destinations. In order for an animal to enter the UK it must have documentation to show that it has been vaccinated (and achieved an adequate level of protection) against rabies. If you plan to take your pet abroad then you should discuss the risks with your vet and find out if additional vaccinations are required. It can take many months to complete appropriate documentation so make sure you plan well in advance.

How can I protect myself and my pet?

There are few reports of anyone surviving rabies and animals suspected of having rabies are usually euthanased. For this reason prevention of infection is essential. Vaccination is normally highly effective against rabies, however it may not completely eliminate the risk of contracting rabies in certain circumstances. Most pets in the UK have no natural immunity to rabies.

If you are travelling abroad with your pet then vaccination is required. A course of vaccinations is given and then your pet must have a blood test to confirm that they are protected. If you are travelling abroad you should also consider your own health. If you are bitten by an animal abroad always seek local medical advice. Vaccination is an important means of prevention both before possible exposure and after exposure.

In countries where rabies occurs any domestic animal that has bitten a person is detained and observed for

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at least 10 days. If the animal has rabies it is likely to show signs within 4-7 days. Care should be taken to avoid contact with secretions (saliva, urine) of infected, or potentially infected, individuals. A person who is bitten by a rabid animal but given treatment with rabies vaccines can expect not to develop rabies.

If you want any other information on health issues concerning your cat please contact Orwell Veterinary Group on 01473 333677 and we will be happy to advise you.