

General Rabies Information – FAQ

People living in Douglas County are asked to report roadkill, stray or wild animals, especially those observed acting strangely, to the Nebraska Humane Society at 402-444-7800, ext. 1.

- Do not touch or move the animals.
- Do not approach wild or stray animals.
- Vaccinate your pets if they are not already or if their shots are not up-to-date.

The Douglas County Health Department will operate an information line:

- Call 402-444-3400.

The following are frequently asked questions about rabies and current efforts to prevent the virus from spreading.

What is rabies?

Rabies is a disease caused by a virus that affects the nervous system of mammals. The virus is typically present in the saliva of infected animals and is transmitted through a bite. The virus can incubate for several weeks to months but ranges from days to years. Unfortunately, once a person begins to show signs and symptoms of rabies, the disease is nearly always fatal. However, rabies is 100 percent preventable through appropriate medical treatment.

How common is rabies in the United States?

Approximately 5,000 animal rabies cases are reported annually to CDC. More than 90% of those cases occur in wildlife. Most rabies cases are identified in bats, raccoons and skunks. Before major efforts to identify and prevent rabies through vaccination and leash laws, rabies cases were mostly found in domestic animals such as dogs.

How many people die a year from rabies in the United States?

Human deaths from rabies in the United States are extremely rare but usually occur in people who do not seek prompt medical care following exposure to an infected animal. On average, the United States sees 1 to 3 human deaths from rabies each year. Contact from bats is the most common cause of human rabies infections in the United States, with 70% of human rabies deaths resulting from exposures to rabies infected bats.

CDC estimates that approximately 60,000 Americans are exposed to a rabid animal each year. Fortunately, deaths are rare due to timely access to healthcare, including wound cleaning, public health consultation, and rabies vaccinations when indicated.

What animals in Nebraska are reservoirs or carriers for rabies?

An animal is a reservoir for rabies when it can carry the disease. It may or may not get sick itself, but it can spread the disease to other animals. In Nebraska, rabies is mostly found in bats and skunks. Raccoons in Nebraska are not known to carry the virus, but if they were to become infected with the disease could spread to other raccoons and become established in the state. Raccoon rabies has not been established west of the Appalachian Mountains.

How common is rabies in Nebraska?

In recent years Nebraska has had 20 to 30 cases of animal rabies identified per year. Most of these cases have been in bats.

What animals can get rabies?

All mammals can get rabies, but only a few species serve as reservoirs or carriers for the disease. In the United States, distinct variants of the rabies virus have been identified in bats, raccoons, skunks, foxes and mongooses.

Current Status

What is happening in Douglas County with the rabies case?

A confirmed kitten infected with a raccoon variant of the rabies virus is not typical in Nebraska. This case has prompted public health response efforts including increased surveillance and testing as well as trapping and vaccinating raccoons in the community.

What is being done about the situation?

Public health authorities are asking all residents to report strange-acting animals. That includes animals that are aggressive, unusually tame or appear to be having seizures. Members of the public can also assist health officials by reporting roadkill or dead cats, raccoons, skunks and foxes. Those calls should go to the Nebraska Humane Society at **402-444-7800, ext. 1**.

What are the potential implications of this rabies variant being found in Nebraska?

The introduction of a new rabies virus variant into a new population could have significant human and animal health implications, including increased instances of rabid wildlife, rabies exposures in people, need for rabies shots, and risk for exposure and death in domestic pets and livestock. The overall cost to humans and livestock may be substantially increased if raccoon rabies becomes established in Nebraska.

Rabies Surveillance and Testing

To protect the public and identify additional cases of rabies in the community, the Douglas County Health Department, the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, CDC and USDA Wildlife Services are working together to conduct enhanced rabies surveillance and testing. This will include enhanced rabies testing which also involves the collection and testing of animals found dead and those reported to be ill or

exhibiting potential signs of rabies. The CDC team supporting testing efforts is also known as CDC EPI-AID and consists of several CDC Epidemic Intelligence Service Officers.

How can you tell if an animal has rabies?

Animals with rabies may act strangely or may exhibit no symptoms at all. Symptoms to watch out for include problems swallowing, excessive drooling, strange vocalization, difficulty breathing, paralysis, seizures, and aggression or other abnormal behaviors. A diagnosis of rabies can be made after detection of rabies virus from any part of the affected brain, but to rule out rabies, samples must be collected from dead animals.

What should I do if I encounter a dead or strange/sick acting animal? Who do I contact?

Do not touch, attempt to trap, or interact with the animal. Children and pets should be brought indoors to reduce exposure risk to the animal. The Douglas County Health Department asks that people immediately call the Nebraska Humane Society at **402-444-7800, ext. 1**.

Trap-Vaccinate-Release Plan

What is the trap-vaccinate-release plan?

USDA Wildlife Services, with assistance from CDC, Douglas County Health Department, Department of Health and Human Services and other local partners, will conduct a trap-vaccinate-release effort as part of our heightened rabies surveillance response. Trap-vaccinate-release involves safe and humane live capture of raccoons and skunks. Once trapped, these animals will be hand vaccinated for rabies, ear tagged for identification and released at the site of capture. Trap-vaccinate-release will help us begin to work toward herd immunity in local wildlife populations and will also provide information about animal population density.

The trap-release-vaccinate effort will take place in an area from F Street on the south to Fort Street on the north, and from 72nd Street on the west to the Missouri River on the east. The trap-release-vaccinate area is roughly a three-mile radius from the east-central part of the city where the kitten was found. As we learn more, this area might expand.

If you live in the established trap-release-vaccinate area, you can expect letters from USDA Wildlife Services to request using your property as a site for safely and humanely trapping raccoons and skunks. Box traps will be used to trap wildlife and should not injure any animals. Some USDA Wildlife Services biologists are going door-to-door to ask your permission. They will be clearly identified as working for USDA Wildlife Services, and you can ask them for identification. Your permission will be a key to making this effort a success.

Oral Rabies Vaccine Bait Distribution Plan

What is the oral rabies vaccine bait distribution plan?

Oral rabies vaccine bait distribution involves dispersal of edible baits containing oral rabies vaccine for raccoons, skunks and other wildlife. USDA Wildlife Services distributes millions of oral rabies vaccine baits in 13 eastern U.S. states each year to prevent the spread of the raccoon rabies virus variant. With cooperation

from CDC, Douglas County Health Department, Nebraska Department of Health and Human Service, and other local Nebraska partners, USDA Wildlife Services will conduct an oral rabies vaccine baiting program in parts of Omaha. Coupled with the trap-vaccine-release and oral rabies vaccine targeting raccoons and skunks will further establish herd immunity against rabies among local wildlife populations.

What should people do?

If my dog or cat is current on rabies vaccinations are there any concerns if I let them outside?

Rabies is rare in vaccinated animals. Most animal exposures to rabies can be prevented by avoiding contact with wildlife or sick domestic animals of unknown rabies vaccination status. Questions regarding possible exposures should be directed promptly to the Nebraska Humane Society at **402-444-7800, ext. 1** or the Douglas County Information line at **402-444-3400**.

Can I let my indoor/outdoor cat or dog outside?

For the time being, it would be best to restrict your cat or dog from going outside off leash. It is never recommended to let your pets roam freely and unattended.

What if I see an animal in a trap?

USDA Wildlife Services will be setting out clearly marked traps that should be left alone. Pets and children should be kept away from traps, so they can successfully capture racoons and skunks. USDA Wildlife Services biologists will be checking traps daily. It is important that wild animals are not moved from one place to another within the county.

I set out traps legally on my property. Should I continue to do this?

Avoid trapping on your property and do not move any trapped animals yourself. If you encounter an animal in a trap, please do not approach it and contact the Nebraska Humane Society at **402-444-7800, ext. 1**, or the Douglas County Information line at **402-444-3400**.

Is there a radius of concern? I picked up a stray cat several miles from the area of concern, what do I do?

The area of greatest concern is from F Street on the south to Fort Street on the north, and from 72nd Street on the west to the Missouri River on the east. It is about a three-mile radius from the central area where the sick kitten was found.

I found a stray cat, what should I do?

Picking up any stray cat is not recommended. Omaha has no leash law for cats but allowing them to roam freely is highly discouraged. Handling a stray animal is very risky. If you see a stray animal contact the Nebraska Humane Society at **402-444-7800, ext. 1**.

I trapped a raccoon, what should I do?

Do not handle or release trapped wildlife. Contact the Nebraska Humane Society at **402-444-7800, ext. 1** and an animal control officer will assist you.

Can I help by picking up dead wildlife and calling the Nebraska Humane Society?

Do not handle dead wildlife. Call the Nebraska Humane Society at **402-444-7800, ext. 1** and an animal control officer will assist you.

What if my pets come in contact with wild animals?

- Contact your veterinarian. Dogs, cats and ferrets that are current on rabies vaccination should immediately receive veterinary medical care for assessment, wound cleansing and booster vaccination within 96 hours of the contact. Your pet should then be kept under your control and observed for signs of rabies for 45 days.
- If you notice an animal such as a raccoon, skunk, other wildlife, or a domestic animal that appears to have any of the following symptoms, contact the Nebraska Humane Society at **402-444-7800, ext. 1**, immediately.
 - Strange or aggressive behavior.
 - Disoriented or confused appearance.
 - Walking in circles.
 - Noticeable drooling or foaming at the mouth.
 - Difficulty moving.
 - Leg paralysis.
 - Unusually tame.
 - Excessive, loud barking.

What do I do if I think I have had a potential exposure to a rabid animal?

If you believe you may have had a potential exposure to rabies such as a bite or scratch from an animal, you should contact your physician or a public health professional to determine your risk for rabies or other illnesses. For consultation about potential exposure to rabies, please contact the Douglas County Health Department information line at **402-444-3400**. Based on consultation, your provider may then prescribe you rabies shots.

What is the treatment for rabies if you have been exposed?

Rabies cannot be treated once symptoms begin. However, the disease is 100% preventable through timely vaccination following a potential exposure. Treatment for a potential exposure is known as Rabies postexposure prophylaxis rabies shots. Rabies shots consist of a single dose of human rabies immune globulin and rabies vaccine given on the day of the rabies exposure, followed by an additional dose of vaccine given on days 3, 7 and 14. For people who have never been vaccinated against rabies, rabies shots should always include administration of both HRIG and four doses of rabies vaccine. The combination of human rabies immune globulin and vaccine is recommended for both bite and non-bite exposures, regardless of the interval between exposure and initiation of treatment. Rabies immune globulin and the first dose of rabies vaccine should be given by your health care provider as soon as possible after exposure. Current vaccines are relatively painless and are given in your arm like a flu or tetanus vaccine; rabies vaccines are not given in the stomach.

How can I protect my pets from rabies?

1. Visit your veterinarian with your pet on a regular basis and keep rabies vaccinations current for all cats, dogs and ferrets.
2. Maintain control of your pets by keeping cats and ferrets indoors and keeping dogs under direct supervision when they are allowed outside.
3. Spay or neuter your pets to help reduce the number of unwanted pets that may not be properly cared for or vaccinated regularly.
4. Contact the Nebraska Humane Society at **402-444-7800, ext. 1** for removal of stray animals from your neighborhood since these animals may be unvaccinated or ill.

Where can I find the latest information on the increased surveillance?

<https://dhhs.ne.gov/Pages/Douglas-County-Raccoon-Rabies-Variant-Virus-Enhanced-Surveillance.aspx>