

Rabies

What is Rabies?

A fatal viral disease of animals and humans.

When does the disease occur?

Any time of the year.

What animals are affected?

Rabies is primarily a disease of all warm-blooded mammals, including dogs, cats, and various wildlife, with spillover to cattle. In South Africa the domestic dog, black-backed jackal, bat-eared fox, and yellow mongoose are common vectors of the disease.

How is the disease transmitted?

By bite, scratch, or licking of a wound or mucous membranes by a rabid animal, commonly dogs or other carnivores. Occasionally bats may transmit the virus to susceptible hosts.

What signs do affected animals show?

There are two forms of the disease: furious (most cases) and dumb/paralytic. Animals with furious rabies may display aggression, biting,



Photo by: Agricultural Research Council, Onderstepoort Veterinary Institute

Figure 1: Bellowing cow - a common clinical sign of rabies



Photo by: Dr De Villiers, L., Department of New Generation Vaccines, Agricultural Research Council

Figure 2: Rabies vaccine used for dogs

behavioural changes, salivation, and death. Animals with dumb rabies may show signs of a drooping jaw and paralysis.

How is the disease diagnosed?

Animals suspected to have rabies should be quarantined, or euthanized and central nervous tissues submitted for laboratory confirmation of the disease. The fluorescent antibody test (routine first-line test), virus isolation (back-up test), immunohistochemistry, histopathology, or PCR tests may be used to diagnose rabies.

How is the disease treated and controlled?

Once clinical signs manifest, treatment is often not possible. Vaccination is the best means of control. Annual immunization with a dead vaccine is compulsory for dogs and cats in South Africa, and may be used strategically in livestock. If exposed to an animal suspected to be rabid, seek immediate veterinary advice and medical care. For more information, speak to your local animal health technician or state veterinarian.

Note: Humans can also contract rabies!

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