



Rabies

Protecting yourself when you travel

This handout explains what rabies is. It includes information about how to protect yourself from getting it when you travel and what to do if you are exposed to it.

What is rabies?

Rabies is a viral infection that affects the central nervous system. The virus can be transmitted through the saliva of any mammal, such as dogs, cats, bats, and monkeys.

Travelers are most often exposed to rabies by the bite of a dog. But it can also be transmitted through a deep scratch or a lick on an open wound by an animal that has the virus.

Rabies, once it develops, is 100% fatal. Symptoms usually begin as a mild viral illness (fever, headache, and weakness or discomfort) and progress to paralysis, seizures, coma, and death.

Am I at risk for getting rabies when I travel?

Any traveler is at risk for getting rabies. But your risk depends on where you travel, how long you travel, and your exposure to animals.

Rabies is present almost everywhere in the world. Places with higher risk include Africa, Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Ecuador, Columbia, India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. Rabies has not been found in Antarctica, Australia, New Zealand, parts of Oceania (the South Pacific) and the Caribbean, and most of Western Europe.

People at high risk for getting rabies include veterinarians, wildlife biologists, backpackers, and missionaries. Travelers who do a lot of outdoor activities, such as hiking, camping, and cycling, are at moderate risk.

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How can I prevent rabies when I travel?

Depending on your travel plans, you may think about getting partial protection with a rabies vaccine before you leave on your trip. Talk with a travel health specialist about your actual risk of rabies exposure.

Low-risk Travelers

If you are at low risk for rabies exposure, you do not need to get a rabies vaccine before your trip. If you are exposed to rabies while traveling, **seek effective treatment at an approved health care facility within 24 hours**, or as soon as possible.

High-risk Travelers

If you are at high risk for rabies exposure, you may receive a series of 3 injections of rabies vaccine before your trip. This series should be started at least 1 month before you leave. If you have received the pre-exposure series and are exposed to rabies on your trip, **seek medical care as soon as possible**.

Low-risk Traveler	High-risk Traveler
No vaccine, unless an exposure occurs.	3 doses of rabies vaccine before the trip, given over 21 to 28 days.

What should I do if I need treatment during my trip?

We recommend talking with your local U.S. consulate or embassy, or using the services of the International Association for Medical Assistance to Travelers (IAMAT). Visit their website at www.iamat.org.

We also recommend buying *medical evacuation coverage* before you leave on your trip. This type of insurance covers medical emergencies that occur while you are traveling. It may include emergency transportation, care at a hospital, medical evacuation back home, and more. Having this coverage will be helpful if you are exposed to rabies or have an injury or other serious health care need.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or health care provider if you have questions or concerns. UWMC clinic staff are also available to help.

Travel Services/Family
Medical Center

Phone: 206-598-4055

Fax: 206-598-5720

What should I do if I am exposed to rabies?

If you are exposed to rabies, follow these guidelines:

	If you did NOT have a rabies vaccine before your trip	If you DID have a rabies vaccine before your trip
Primary Treatment	Vigorous washing of wound with soapy water and an iodine solution, such as Betadine (avoid iodine-based products if you have allergies to iodine) for 20 minutes right after exposure	
Rabies Vaccine	Beginning within 24 hours of exposure or as soon as possible: 5 doses of <i>intramuscular</i> (IM) vaccine on days 0, 3, 7, 14, and 28	Beginning as soon as possible after exposure: 2 more <i>intramuscular</i> (IM) doses on days 0 and 3
HRIG (<i>Human rabies immune globulin</i>)* IU = international unit Kg = kilogram	20 IU per kg of body weight administered around the wound, with the rest given by injection within 24 hours of exposure or as soon as possible	Not needed

* If HRIG is not available, you may want to consider using *equine rabies immune globulin* (ERIG).

Contraindications (Reasons to Withhold Treatment)

If you have had serious reactions to a rabies vaccine or HRIG in the past, you should not receive a rabies vaccine or HRIG.

References

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *CDC Health Information for International Travel 2010*. Atlanta: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, 2009.

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Sanford, C: *The Adventurous Traveler's Guide to Health*, University of Washington Press, 2008.

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Family Medical Center**

Box 354770

1959 N.E. Pacific St. Seattle, WA 98195
206-598-4055