

Canine Distemper

What is it?

Canine distemper is caused by a virus that attacks the central nervous system.

How is it spread?

Usually through contact with a sick animal or infected urine, droppings, or body fluids.

What kinds of animals catch it?

This disease is found most often in raccoons, gray foxes and striped skunks.

Unvaccinated dogs are another high-risk group. The disease is especially deadly for puppies. It doesn't affect humans or cats.

What happens to sick animals?

Canine distemper is very common in the wild. A study in west-central Illinois showed that about 20-30% of raccoons had been exposed at some point in their life. Death rates for infected animals can range from about 20% for domestic dogs to as high as 90% for other animals.

What are the signs?

An animal's behavior can change when it gets sick. Lab tests are needed to make a positive diagnosis, but you should be cautious of any animal that:

- loses its fear of people
- is out during the day when its normal routine is at night
- staggers, falls or stumbles
- has convulsions, tremors or fits
- has severe diarrhea or pus-like fluid coming out of its eyes or nose
- shows patches of thick, discolored skin on the pads of its feet

Can the same signs show up in animals with other diseases?

Yes. Rabies can cause the same changes in behavior. Lab tests are the only sure way to tell which disease an animal has. Sick animals generally don't need to be tested unless they've bitten or scratched someone. **Treat every animal bite as a risk for rabies.**

Your life depends on it.

Some References

Infectious Diseases of Wild Mammals (second edition), edited by J.W. Davis, L.H. Karstad and D.O. Trainer. Iowa State Univ. Press, Ames, IA. 1981. ISBN 0-8138-0445-0.

Field Manual of Wildlife Diseases in the Southeastern United States (second edition) by W.R. Davidson and V.F. Nettles. Southeastern Cooperative Wildlife Disease Study, Athens, GA. 1997.

Some contacts

● the Illinois Department of Natural Resources monitors wildlife populations and licenses people who remove wild animals that are sick or causing a nuisance (217/782-6384; <http://dnr.state.il.us>)

● the Illinois Department of Agriculture oversees rabies tag licensing, animal welfare and domestic animal control (217/782-6657; <http://www.agr.state.il.us>)

● the Illinois Department of Public Health monitors infectious diseases like rabies and can provide technical advice if someone is bitten by an animal (217/782-2016; <http://www.isph.state.il.us>)

What should I do if:

I want to avoid problems?

- Vaccinate your dogs on schedule
- Don't touch or adopt wild animals
- Teach kids to leave wildlife alone and tell you if they've been bitten or scratched
- Keep pets inside your home or in a kennel when you're not around
- Don't feed wild animals or attract them by leaving food where they can get it

I hunt or trap animals that might have diseases?

- Put bandages on cuts or open sores before working on an animal
- Wear latex gloves during handling
- Afterward, wash with soap and warm water
- Cook meat until well done

I see a sick animal near my home?

- Stay away from the animal
- Keep your children away from it
- Bring your pets indoors
- Wait for the animal to leave or call the Department of Natural Resources for a list of people who are licensed to remove sick & nuisance animals for a fee
- If the animal dies, bury it at least 12" deep where other animals can't dig it up

My pet is bitten?

- Confine or kill the wild animal that bit your pet, but only if you can do so without any risk to yourself. Do not damage the head or store the dead animal in a freezer.
- Call your veterinarian or local health department for advice.

A person is bitten?

- Immediately wash the bite with lots of soap and water
- Go to your family doctor or the nearest emergency room without delay - options for effective treatment dwindle with time

Proper treatment will depend on the risk of getting rabies. Information about the animal will help determine that risk.

If the animal was a pet and you know its owners, find out if it has a current rabies vaccination. Write down the rabies tag number and the names and phone numbers of the pet's owner and veterinarian. If you don't know its owners, make a note of its breed, color and markings, whether it had a collar, whether you noticed any tags on its collar, and what direction it was headed. Call your local animal control agency to help locate and catch the animal.

If it was a wild animal, confine or kill the animal that bit you, but only if you can do so without further risk. Do not damage the head or store the animal in a freezer. Call your local animal control agency if you need assistance.

Tips for handling wild animals that are killed for rabies testing

- ✓ Wear rubber or latex gloves and a face mask
- ✓ Don't damage the brain - it's needed for tests
- ✓ Double wrap the animal in plastic garbage bags and keep it cool but do not freeze the animal
- ✓ Wash with soap and water; clean the area and any tools with 1 part bleach to 10 parts water
- ✓ Only animals that bite someone are tested