



Should I be worried about rabies?

Make sure that your pet is vaccinated against rabies, especially if you live near a poor rural community or in the endemic area of KZN.



DR LARRY VAN NIEKERK

Dr Larry van Niekerk is a veterinary specialist surgeon, veterinary business consultant and speaker. He is founder and Chairman of the Institute for Veterinary Practice Development.

Q We adopted an 8-week-old German Shepherd cross Labrador puppy recently, and while playing around he wouldn't let go of his ball. I tried prying it out of his mouth and the little tyke was able to grab hold of my thumb and give it a bite. He managed to open the skin and draw a little blood, so I washed the wound with Dettol and put a plaster on it.

I didn't worry about it until I remembered that rabies is spread through saliva; now I am concerned, especially given that we live in KwaZulu-Natal.

He has received his first vaccination, but probably hasn't received the rabies vaccine yet. Although he doesn't have any symptoms of an illness, I'm so worried about contracting rabies.

What are the first symptoms of rabies and how long does it take to show signs of rabies after being exposed to it – or is there an incubation period?

Please help.

James Lennon – Ballito, KwaZulu-Natal

A You certainly did the right thing by washing the wound immediately as this is the form of contact where infected saliva gets into an open wound. However, your puppy's behaviour is not one of a rabid dog, so you can rest easy.

KwaZulu-Natal is an enzootic area and has been since 1976. The only solution is for all dog owners to vaccinate annually.

The incubation period is 3-8 weeks, and varies, depending on how close the bite is to the brain as the virus travels up the nerves to the brain. Once a dog starts showing signs, they are usually dead within five to ten days.

The clinical symptoms vary, but are mainly changes in behaviour, such as becoming anxious, nervous or hiding. Friendly animals become snappy, or normally fractious animals become docile. Once the virus gets to the brain, the dog develops one of two forms of rabies. The furious form results in the animal becoming excitable, sensitive to light and stimuli, and snapping and biting at imaginary objects. The paralytic form causes salivation and a change in voice as the nerves controlling the larynx and swallowing are affected.

The single most important control measure is vaccinate, vaccinate, vaccinate!

The dangers of rabies



One child dies every 10 minutes in Africa and Asia from rabies. Therefore,

any dog bite case must be treated seriously. It is the only infectious disease with a 100 percent mortality rate. Sadly, children, especially in rural areas, are affected because of the risk of exposure to unvaccinated animals, poor access to health care, and lack of treatment after being bitten. Regrettably, when a child dies it is a direct reflection of a health system failure, and a failure to follow post-exposure processes in dealing with the child and the animal.

The inadequate control of canine rabies in Africa is completely responsible for this situation. Vaccination is the single most important method of creating a barrier between a non-vaccinated animal and a human victim.

VACCINATE, VACCINATE, VACCINATE!

Puppies can be vaccinated from birth for rabies, although the recommendation is a three month vaccination, followed by a booster after one month, and then again nine months later, and again every three years. Although it is a legal requirement to have your dog vaccinated every three years, in rabies control areas like KZN it is recommended annually.

In South Africa, rabies affects the domestic dog, black-backed jackal, bat-eared fox and yellow mongoose. The domestic dog is the source of infection in most South African cases.

Once a dog has been infected, the virus enters the wound and travels up the nerves to the brain. This may take 3-8 weeks, after which nervous signs develop.

Vaccination is the single most important method of creating a barrier between a non-vaccinated animal and a human victim.

The early signs are nervousness, withdrawing and behaviour changes, with friendly animals becoming unpredictable and snappy, or normally scared animals becoming friendly. The animal may become more excitable, sensitive to light and touch, and bark or snap at imaginary things. It may attack and eat foreign objects, and lick or chew the original bite wound. Some animals become disorientated, develop seizures and soon die, while some have difficulty swallowing and breathing as the virus paralyses the throat muscle. DO NOT try to remove the apparent stuck object.

If there is any uncertainty as to

the vaccination status or behaviour of the dog causing the bite, consult your veterinarian and a medical practitioner immediately.

There is no test that can be performed on a dog that will determine if it has rabies before it dies. Any animal that has suspected rabies should preferably be euthanised and the brain sent to a laboratory for diagnosis by a veterinary surgeon. If an animal cannot be euthanised, or the owner refuses to allow euthanasia, the dog may be confined and observed for 10 days; this will rule out the animal as having rabies.

Your veterinarian will provide advice on post-exposure treatment and will collaborate with the medical practitioner as to which post-exposure action should be taken. This depends on the one of three risk categories, varying from touching an animal, to broken skin from bites caused by infected animals which requires local wound treatment and administration of human rabies immunoglobulins. 🐾