

Rabies Vaccine (Pre-exposure)

What is rabies?

Rabies is a very serious disease. It can kill a person who is not treated after contact with an animal that has rabies. The disease can cause confusion, breathing problems and seizures. These signs may not show up for two to eight weeks. By then, there is no cure and the person will die.

Who should receive the vaccine for pre-exposure?

The following individuals should receive the rabies vaccine for pre-exposure:

- persons who may be continuously at risk (e.g., rabies research laboratory workers) or frequently at risk (e.g. veterinarians and people who study and explore caves as a hobby),
- persons in rabies-prevalent areas where ready transportation to an appropriate health care facility cannot be assured,
- persons in rabies-prevalent areas there is limited access to health care facilities that have the rabies vaccine and immunoglobulins,
- Children living in areas where rabies affects animals in only one locality or season and they are too young to understand their need to avoid animals or to report an animal bite.

When should the rabies vaccine be given?

A series of three, 1.0 ml intramuscular, injections is required. The first two shots are given one week apart. A third injection is given two weeks after the second injection. You should finish this series at least ten days before being in a high-risk environment.

Are there any side effects?

You may have soreness, swelling and redness at the site of injection. A few people may have headaches, loss of appetite, stomach pain, muscle aches or dizziness. Serious side effects are rare. Call your doctor or health unit if any symptoms last for more than two days, or if you have any unusual symptoms.

When should you talk to your physician?

You should contact your physician prior to receiving the vaccine if you:

- have had a reaction to vaccines in the past,
- have an allergy to any component of the vaccine (e.g., neomycin),
- have a weakened immune system,
- are pregnant.

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The vaccine should be postponed in anyone who has a fever or any illness more serious than a cold.

Will I ever need another rabies vaccination?

If you are at continued risk of being exposed to rabies, you should have your blood tested every two years to see if you still have adequate protection. A booster dose may be recommended.

What should I do if I am exposed to rabies?

Vaccination is not 100 percent protective. If you are bitten or scratched by any animal that might have rabies, wash the wound immediately for several minutes with lots of soap and clean water. You must see a doctor immediately for treatment, even if you have been vaccinated.

FS# 135
08/0702