

KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER ABOUT RABIES AND BAT LYSSAVIRUS

- 1 Rabies can be transmitted by the saliva of infected mammals through a bite or scratch.
- 2 Avoid contact with bats and other mammals whilst travelling overseas.
- 3 Avoid contact with bats in Australia.
- 4 If bitten or scratched by a bat in Australia or a mammal (including bats) overseas.
 - a Clean the wound vigorously with soap and water and apply an iodine-containing antiseptic.
 - b Seek medical advice without delay - vaccine and rabies immunoglobulin may be required.
- 5 Rabies immunoglobulin is very difficult to acquire in many countries and so, in consultation with medical personnel, consider returning without delay to Australia for rabies immunoglobulin.

Rabies and Bat Lyssavirus advice for travellers.

What is rabies?

Rabies is a fatal viral disease that usually occurs following a bite or a scratch from a warm blooded infected animal. Rabies is preventable by avoiding animal contact or by urgent treatment. In developing countries dogs are the most common source of rabies. Monkeys, cats, bats, raccoons, foxes and other mammals also can carry rabies. In Australia all species of bats can carry a rabies-like virus called Australian Bat Lyssavirus.

All contact with the saliva of a mammal whilst travelling overseas should prompt medical assessment without delay. Most commonly this will be through a bite or a scratch. It is not possible to know if there is rabies virus in an animal bite or scratch wound so all wounds need to be treated as rabies infected and treatment needs to be started without delay.

What is the risk of rabies?

Rabies is a common infection in developing countries. More than 50,000 people who do not have access to treatment die of rabies each year. There is rabies in Bali and over 100 Balinese people have died of rabies in the past few years.

Rabies in travellers is rare. There are no reported deaths from returned Australian travellers but since 2001 there have been at least 22 deaths in travellers, mainly from Europe and the USA.

There have been two deaths due to Australian Bat Lyssavirus resulting from a bat bite or scratch in Australia prior to the routine use of post-exposure treatment.

How to avoid rabies

The most important way to avoid rabies is to avoid contact with wild or stray animals. All stray dogs in overseas countries should be presumed to have rabies, even if the animal appears friendly. Be aware that some activities such as running or cycling can attract the attention of dogs. If travelling with children teach them not to touch or approach any animal.

Monkeys should not be fed or handled. Food should not be carried when visiting areas where there are monkeys, such as some temples in Bali.

All contact with bats should be avoided and bats should never be handled by the public in Australia or in any other country.

What is the treatment?

It is very important to clean any animal bite or scratch thoroughly with soap and water and hold the wound under running water for at least 5 minutes. An iodine-containing antiseptic such as povidone-iodine (e.g. Betadine wipes, available in many pharmacies in Australia) should then be applied. Antibiotics may be required to prevent a wound infection but they will not prevent rabies.

In addition to thorough wound cleaning, rabies treatment consists of rabies immunoglobulin (for higher risk exposures) and a series of rabies vaccinations.

Rabies immunoglobulin provides immediate protection from rabies infection and if this is required, as much as possible is injected in and around the wound.

The series of rabies vaccines are necessary to protect adequately against rabies infection and are administered in the upper arm.

After a bat bite or scratch in Australia, your GP or hospital emergency department can arrange for the delivery and injection of human rabies immunoglobulin and the series of rabies vaccines.

If bitten or scratched by an animal overseas, immediately seek medical assistance after you have thoroughly cleaned the wound.

Rabies immunoglobulin is in short supply and may not be available in many developing countries. Consult with medical staff and if the bite is considered high risk for rabies, such as one resulting from an unprovoked attack, it is important to receive rabies immunoglobulin (RIG) in addition to rabies vaccine. Where a local quality supply of RIG (human or equine) is not available it may be prudent to terminate your travel, return to Australia and consult your GP for rabies immunoglobulin which must be commenced within 7 days of the first rabies vaccine. If a person returns to Australia 8 days or more after commencing vaccine overseas, then rabies immunoglobulin will not be given.

Rabies vaccine is widely available in most countries. Safe rabies vaccines are cell culture derived vaccines and are interchangeable. In some countries such as China other types of vaccines are available and seeking a cell culture derived vaccine is advised. Beware of counterfeit vaccine overseas.

Travel insurance may expedite urgent access to reliable healthcare while travelling and assist with unplanned return to Australia if needed.

Rabies vaccination prior to travel

Prior rabies vaccination simplifies rabies treatment in the event of an animal bite or scratch as no immunoglobulin and fewer additional doses of rabies vaccine are required. However, rabies vaccine is expensive and the risk of exposure must be considered.

Rabies vaccine is recommended prior to exposure for:

People in Australia liable to receive bites or scratches from bats, such as veterinarians and wildlife animal rescuers

Expatriates and travellers who will spend time in rabies endemic countries, particularly those residing or travelling in remote areas with poor access to emergency medical attention. Children and young people are more likely to have high risk animal exposures.

People working with mammals in rabies endemic areas

Research and laboratory workers working with rabies virus or Australian Bat Lyssavirus