



Procedures for Veterinarians Reporting Suspect Rabid Animals, Rabies Exposures and Bites January 2021

Requirements for Reporting Suspect Rabies Cases

Per N.J.A.C. 8:23-1.2, “persons, including veterinarians and animal control officers, having in their possession, care or control, owning or having an interest in or knowledge of, an animal affected with rabies or suspected of being affected with rabies, shall provide forthwith a report containing the fact of the animal being affected with or suspected of being affected with rabies to the person designated to receive such reports by the local health agency having jurisdiction over the place where the animal is located.” The report shall contain the location of the animal; a description of the animal; the name, address and telephone number of the owner or person with possession, care, or control or having interest in the animal; and the reporter’s name and telephone number.

Guidance for Domestic Animals Displaying Signs of Rabies

If a veterinarian determines that a domestic animal is displaying clinical signs of rabies or has been exposed to rabies, he or she shall immediately notify the local health department (LHD) where the animal is housed¹. If the animal is a livestock species (horse, cow, sheep, etc.), the New Jersey Department of Agriculture should also be notified. A complete history should be taken from the owner of the animal including vaccination status, history of wounds, contact with wildlife, onset of symptoms and the names of people who have been bitten by the animal or may have had non-bite exposures (saliva from the animal contaminating an open wound or mucous membrane) within 10 days prior to the onset of illness. Although this report can initially be made via telephone, a written report should also be mailed or faxed to the LHD which will confine the animal or submit a specimen for rabies testing if the animal dies or is euthanized.

If the suspect rabid animal is euthanized, the veterinarian shall decapitate and store the head under refrigeration until it is delivered to New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH) Public Health and Environmental Laboratories (PHEL) for rabies testing. Decapitation should be done using appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) such as gloves, masks, and eye protection to ensure that the veterinarian is not exposed to the rabies virus. Pursuant to medical waste regulations, specimens submitted to PHEL CANNOT be returned to the owner. The NJDOH recommends decapitation rather than brain removal for rabies testing of domestic companion animals. Removing the brain creates an increased public health risk by increasing the chance of exposure to rabies virus and is also more technically challenging. In situations where a veterinarian has the technical expertise and tools to safely and correctly remove a brain for rabies testing, the veterinarian may do so while using appropriate PPE. In this case, the body of the animal may be returned to the owner in (almost) intact condition **if rabies testing is negative. The body cannot be returned unless a negative rabies test is obtained.**

If the animal is not euthanized, it is recommended that it be hospitalized or confined and observed. Precautions should be taken to prevent bites or exposures from the suspect rabid animal by isolating the animal, limiting staff contact and using appropriate PPE, whenever the animal is handled. If the animal is infected with rabies, its condition will deteriorate rapidly, with death usually occurring within several days after illness onset. If the owner refuses to hospitalize a suspect rabid animal, immediately notify the LHD with jurisdiction where the animal is kept.

Guidance for Domestic Animals that Bite Humans

The NJDOH recommends that veterinarians report all known animal bites or rabies exposures to people to the LHD where the incident took place. The report should include the animal owner's contact information and a description of the biting animal. Health Officers have staff to investigate and have the authority to order biting animals confined for 10 days² or can arrange for rabies testing at the PHEL if the animal dies or is euthanized³. Laboratory testing would not be necessary if the animal remains healthy through the 10-day confinement. Domestic animal confinements are usually completed at the owner's residence and are monitored by the LHD.

It is recommended that veterinarians ask owners of animals presented for euthanasia if anyone was bitten by the animal within 10 days and include this question on their euthanasia release form. Dogs and cats that remain healthy for 10 days after a bite can be euthanized as per normal procedures and would not need to be submitted for rabies testing. However, if a bite has occurred within 10 days of the animal's death, the veterinarian shall report to the Health Officer, who will determine if a specimen shall be submitted for laboratory testing. The Health Officer can, and usually will, order the animal to be tested for rabies, pursuant to their authority under N.J.R.S. 26:4-86³. If the biting animal remains asymptomatic 10 days post-exposure, the animal would not need to be tested.

In the event veterinarians become aware of a bite AFTER euthanizing an animal, they should notify the LHD immediately and refrigerate the specimen (not dispose of or freeze) until the Health Officer determines if rabies testing is required.

Pursuant to medical waste regulations, all specimens submitted to PHEL CANNOT be returned to the owner. The NJDOH recommends decapitation rather than brain removal for rabies testing of domestic companion animals. Removing the brain creates an increased public health risk by increasing the chance of exposure to rabies virus and is also more technically challenging. In situations where a veterinarian has the technical expertise and tools to safely and correctly remove a brain for rabies testing, the veterinarian may do so while using appropriate PPE. In this case, the body of the animal may be returned to the owner in (almost) intact condition **if rabies testing is negative. The body cannot be returned unless a negative rabies test is obtained.** PPE such as gloves, masks, and eye protection should be used when decapitating the head or removing the brain to prevent human exposure to rabies.

Guidance for Wildlife:

Veterinarians may be presented with sick raccoons or other high-risk wildlife (i.e. skunks, foxes, groundhogs, or bats). If there has been a bite or exposure to a person or domestic animal, the animal should be euthanized and tested for rabies. Local animal control can assist with euthanizing suspect rabid wildlife. Rabid wildlife may not show clear clinical signs of rabies and may survive the infection.

Health Officers can address rabies-related questions and are a valuable resource to practitioners for rabies and other zoonotic disease situations. In the event of emergencies, they can be contacted through the police department on nights, weekends, and holidays. A directory of LHDs is posted online: www.localhealth.nj.gov

¹ New Jersey Statutes 26:4-78 requires any person having knowledge of a dog, cat or other animal suspected of being affected by rabies or has been bitten by a suspect rabid animal to notify the Health Officer with jurisdiction over the location of the animal.

² New Jersey Statutes 26:4-82 authorizes the Health Officer to issue a 10-day confinement order for a domestic animal who bit a human.

³ New Jersey Statutes 26:4-86 authorizes the Health Officer to examine the animal at any time. If the animal dies or is euthanized within the 10-day confinement period, the Health Officer may order a laboratory examination for rabies to be performed.