



Pennsylvania Department of
AGRICULTURE

Understanding Rabies Quarantines for Veterinary Clinics

A great deal of confusion exists about the quarantines that are required by law after known or suspected exposure of a domestic mammal to rabies or after a mammal bites a human. The following should clarify the differences. ***Please note that this document is based on PDA regulations which may differ from the recommendations in the Compendium. In the Commonwealth of PA, PA regulations must be followed.***

A key concept in understanding rabies quarantines relates to whether the animal was bitten or was the biter.

I. **THE BITER:**

The animal that bit the person will either be confined and observed for at least 10 days or be euthanized and tested for rabies.

1. If the biter is a **domestic, dog, cat or ferret**, it can be confined and observed at its home for **10 days**. Confidence in keeping the dog, cat or ferret for observation (vs. euthanasia for immediate testing) is enhanced if the bite was provoked (if someone stepped on its tail, for example).
2. What is the rationale for the 10-day period of confinement for dogs, cats or ferrets? If the biter was a dog, cat or ferret and it had rabies virus in its saliva when it did the biting, research shows that it should die or show clinical signs of rabies within 10 days of the bite (rare exceptions may exist).
3. If the biter is any other kind of mammal other than a dog, cat or ferret, research has not well defined the time frame from when shedding of virus starts until obvious clinical signs develop. Consult the Department of Health for their recommendations.
4. If biter is showing clinical signs consistent with rabies, see Number III. Different rules apply!

II. THE BITTEN:

The pet that has been bitten by a confirmed or suspected rabid mammal will either be (1) euthanized, or (2) quarantined for 90 days if current on rabies vaccination, or (3) quarantined for 180 days if unvaccinated for rabies. There are no other options. There are NO ten-day quarantines for animals bitten by a confirmed or suspected rabid animal. PDA Regional staff will make the decision as to the appropriate length of quarantine to apply in each case.

The quarantine reflects the period of time it could take for the **bitten (exposed)** mammal to develop disease. In mammals, the incubation period for rabies can be as short as two weeks or as long as several months, however there are rare reports of much longer incubation periods. During quarantine, the **exposed** animal is confined and observed to see if certain behaviors develop. Clinical signs may suggest rabies, but the only definitive diagnosis is made in the laboratory.

The bitten mammal is not infectious unless the rabies virus successfully travels from the bite site to the animal's brain and salivary glands at which time they may have virus in their saliva. During the time the virus is traveling from the bite site, the animal does not have virus in its saliva and is therefore not able to transmit rabies.

If an animal's rabies vaccination has expired, it is considered by Pennsylvania State Law to be unvaccinated.

1. **Animals current on rabies vaccination:** if the pet or animal exposed to rabies is current on its rabies vaccination, it will be quarantined by the Department of Agriculture for 90 days. (Note: The Compendium for Rabies Control recommends 45 days, but PA Law requires 90 days). This quarantine is a safeguard because no vaccination provides 100% guaranteed protection. Note: It is generally accepted that whenever a vaccinated animal is bitten, it should be immediately revaccinated for rabies. **It is up to the veterinary clinician to determine the best post-exposure protocol for each case.**
2. **Unvaccinated Animals:** when a rabid animal bites a domestic animal or pet that has never been vaccinated for rabies, euthanasia is the safest option. If the owner is unwilling to do this, the Department of Agriculture will quarantine this animal to its home for 180 days. Risk of quarantine should be evaluated; for example: Does the home have small children? Was post-exposure vaccination administered in a timely fashion? Note: protocols exist for vaccinating post-exposure. See JAVMA article "Post-exposure rabies prophylaxis protocol for domestic animals and epidemiologic characteristics of rabies vaccination failures in Texas: 1995-1999", Pamela J. Wilson, Med, and Keith A. Clark, DVM, PhD, JAVMA, February 15, 2001. This article is available from the Regional PDA office if you don't have a copy. **It is up to the veterinary clinician to determine the best post-exposure protocol for each case.**
3. **Animals with expired vaccination status:** if the rabies vaccination has expired, the animal is considered by PA regulations to be unvaccinated and for quarantine purposes will be treated the same as an unvaccinated animal. See number 2 above. Consider previous vaccination history when determining appropriate post-exposure vaccination protocol.

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III. ANIMALS SHOWING CLINICAL SIGNS OF RABIES:

1. Report **any** domestic animal showing clinical signs of rabies to PDA.
2. If the veterinarian determines that the biter is exhibiting clinical signs consistent with rabies **and it has bitten or otherwise exposed a human, then by law it must be euthanized and tested** for rabies. No quarantine applies. This applies to both domestic and wild animals.
3. If the domestic animal is showing clinical signs consistent with rabies **and did not bite a human**, the law mandates quarantine. It is kept quarantined until the clinical signs of rabies have resolved. The law does **not** mandate euthanasia. If the domestic animal showing signs of rabies had exposed another animal and dies within 10 days after the biting or exposure incident, it must be tested for rabies.
4. Quarantining any animal showing clinical signs of rabies is **strongly discouraged** due to risk to the family members and other pets. Euthanasia and testing is a safer option.

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PLEASE NOTE: regardless of the type of rabies quarantine (biter or bitten, vaccinated or unvaccinated), any animal that dies for any reason during that quarantine period should be submitted to an official laboratory for rabies testing.
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Rabies Testing:

Rabies testing is a free service offered to the public. If the specimen is to be sent to the laboratory from our office, please submit only the head, labeled, double-bagged and kept cool (not frozen). Please use the appropriate form for human exposure vs. non-human exposure. If sending directly to the labs, keep in mind that **Lionville will only accept small heads and will not take carcasses**. See appropriate laboratory web site for submission information or contact your Regional PDA office.

Questions?

- Contact your regional PA Department of Agriculture office for questions about domestic animals at <http://www.agriculture.state.pa.us/agriculture/cwp/view.asp?a=3&q=127151>
- Contact your regional PA Game Commission office for questions about wildlife at <http://www.pgc.state.pa.us/pgc/site/default.asp>
- Contact the PA Department of Health for questions concerning people at 1-877-PAHEALTH or <http://www.dsf.health.state.pa.us/health/site/default.asp>