

## **Ask the Vet: What is the big deal about having my pet vaccinated for rabies?**

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Rabies has been known to exist for thousands of years, and dogs have historically been the main reservoir and means of infection to humans. In the United States wildlife is now the main carrier, but in developing countries dogs remain the primary source of disease. Rabies is basically 100% fatal once an animal or person becomes infected, and therefore health officials take it very seriously. Most states have strict laws on their books regarding the vaccination of dogs and the procedures required if an animal or human is potentially exposed. Once signs of the disease are present, it is already too late to reverse its course.

In both Iowa and South Dakota, all dogs are required to be vaccinated for rabies. The initial shot lasts for one year, after which booster vaccinations are good for three years. However, a vaccination that has expired, even for one day, results in the animal being considered “unvaccinated.” At this point, the series needs to start over again with the initial booster only being good for one year. Also, if the animal would bite a human, it must be either quarantined or euthanized for testing. The only test available for rabies is to examine brain tissue after death. Exposure shots for humans must begin prior to becoming sick, so there is a small window of determining whether the biting animal in fact has the disease or is free of it. The best peace of mind is knowing that your pet is vaccinated. Rabies regulations do vary from state to state, so if you travel with your pet, check to see if their laws are different.

In this area, skunks carry rabies more than other species. In 2010, 11 skunks, 10 bats, 1 cow, 1 dog, and 1 fox were diagnosed positive for rabies in Iowa. In South Dakota, 20 skunks, 3 bats, 5 cattle, 3 cats, and 1 dog were rabid last year. Therefore, it is important for you and your pets to be careful around wildlife as well.

Rabies rules can be confusing. If you have any questions or concerns about the disease, feel free to contact your veterinarian, your human health care provider, or your local health department. Iowa and South Dakota departments of health also have good resources available online.