

News story: Public Health England warns travellers of rabies risk

This reminder comes after a UK resident sadly died after becoming infected with rabies following a cat bite during a visit to Morocco. There is no risk to the wider public in relation to this case but, as a precautionary measure, health workers and close contacts are being assessed and offered vaccination when necessary.

Rabies is passed on through injuries such as bites and scratches from an infected animal. There are no documented instances of direct human to human transmission.

Rabies does not circulate in either wild or domestic animals in the UK, although some species of bats can carry a rabies-like virus. Human rabies is extremely rare in the UK. No human cases of rabies acquired in the UK from animals other than bats have been reported since 1902. A single case of human rabies acquired from a bat was reported in 2002 in Scotland; this individual had sustained a number of bat bites. 5 cases of human rabies associated with animal exposures abroad occurred between 2000 and 2017.

Rabies is common in other parts of the world, especially in Asia and Africa. All travellers to rabies affected countries should avoid contact with dogs, cats and other animals wherever possible, and seek advice about the need for rabies vaccine prior to travel.

Anyone who has been bitten, scratched, or licked by an animal in a country with rabies, or has had direct contact with a bat in this country, should take immediate action by washing the wound or site of exposure with plenty of soap and water. Local medical advice should be sought without delay, even in those who have been previously vaccinated.

When given promptly after an exposure, a course of rabies vaccine is extremely effective at preventing the disease. If such an exposure occurs abroad, the traveller should also consult their doctor on return, so that the course of rabies treatment can be completed. If travellers have not sought medical advice abroad, they should contact their doctor promptly upon return for assessment.

Dr Mary Ramsay, Head of Immunisations at PHE said:

This is an important reminder of the precautions people should take when travelling to countries where rabies is present. If you are bitten, scratched or licked by an animal you must wash the wound or site of exposure with plenty of soap and water and seek medical advice without delay.

There is no risk to the wider public in relation to this case but, as a precautionary measure, health workers and close contacts are

being assessed and offered vaccination when necessary.

For more information on the risk of rabies in different countries, see the [country information pages](#) on the National Travel Health Network and Centre's (NaTHNaC's) website, [TravelHealthPro](#).

For more general information about rabies, see the [NHS website](#).

For more information about the risk of rabies in bats in the UK see [PHE's information for individuals who have been bitten by bats](#).

Rabies is a very serious viral infection that affects the brain and central nervous system. It is called a 'zoonotic' infection, which means it passes from animals to humans. The virus is transmitted to humans through animal bites, and can't spread through physical contact or airborne means in the way that other zoonotic infections can.

This means it does not spread from human to human. Despite around 59,000 cases of rabies globally each year, there has yet to be a single confirmed case of human-to-human transmission, with the rare exception of when tissue or organs from a person who has died from rabies have been transplanted into another person.

Initial symptoms can include anxiety, headaches and fever. As the disease progresses, there may be hallucinations and respiratory failure. Spasms of the muscles used for swallowing make it difficult for the patient to drink. The incubation period between being infected and showing symptoms is between 3 and 12 weeks, depending on the site of the initial infection.

Once symptoms have developed, rabies is almost always fatal.

The UK has been rabies-free since the beginning of the 20th century, with the exception of rabies-like viruses in some wild bat species. The last recorded rabies case in the UK was in 2012. In that instance, the individual was bitten by a dog in South Asia.