



Children and Rabies World Rabies Day September 8, 2007

Rabies is a zoonotic viral disease, caused by a virus (*Neurotropic lyssavirus*) which infects domestic and wild animals and is transmitted to other animals and humans through close contact with saliva (i.e. bites, scratches, licks on broken skin and mucous membranes).

The virus has affinity for the nervous system, and once symptoms of the disease develop, rabies is fatal to both animals and humans. The first symptoms are usually non-specific and involve the respiratory, gastrointestinal and central nervous systems. In the acute stage, signs of hyperactivity (furious rabies) or paralysis (dumb rabies) may predominate, but the disease eventually progresses to complete paralysis followed by coma and death in all cases, usually due to respiratory failure. Without intensive care, death occurs after approximately seven days of illness.

An estimated 55,000 human deaths are caused by rabies each year. However, the true number of deaths is unknown due to gross under-reporting of human cases and deaths attributable to rabies.

Children are at special risk due to the way they live and play: in closer proximity to, and more interaction with, dogs, than adults. Children are therefore more likely to be bitten by dogs, and to be severely exposed through multiple bites in high-risk sites on the body. On average, between 30% and 50% of human cases of rabies (and therefore rabies deaths) occur in children less than 15 years of age. Some epidemiological studies suggest an even higher incidence in childhood: up to 60% of rabies cases. Among children, those at the highest risk are 5 to 10 years old, as they are not so closely monitored by parents (unlike infants), most likely to play with dogs, and unable to identify abnormal dog behaviour. They are most likely to receive severe dog bites on the head, face and arms, wound sites most frequently linked to the virus transmission and infection. For example, in Latin America, 88% of the rabies infections were transmitted through dog bites, and 59% of bites in children under 10 years of age were on the head and neck. A large majority of the bites remain unreported, and often unknown to both parents and health officials. Consequently, truly exposed children may never receive timely and complete treatment. There is probably a disproportionately high number of young children contracting and dying of undiagnosed rabies, many more than even the most pessimistic estimates suggest.

The first World Rabies Day is taking place on 8 September 2007. It is an initiative of the Alliance for Rabies Control, with the support of several organizations, including the World Health Organization and the US Centers for Disease Control and the Prevention.

The mission of World Rabies Day is to raise awareness about the importance of human and animal rabies, its prevention and the potential to eliminate the main sources, globally. Even though the major impact of rabies occurs in regions of the world where many other

health and environmental priorities are present, rabies should no longer be neglected: new tools and technologies for human rabies prevention and dog rabies elimination are available. The objectives of the World Rabies Day are:

- To improve global awareness of rabies and promote prevention at the local and community level
- To coordinate global veterinary and medical resources to work together to fight rabies
- To produce and support education initiatives concerning rabies prevention including responsible pet ownership

Specific events will be held in the Americas (Mexico, Brazil, Peru, Bolivia, Haiti, Canada, U.S., among others), Europe, Asia (India, Nepal, Thailand, Philippines, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, among others) and Africa (South Africa, Tanzania, West African French countries). For more information on these events and how you can participate in the World Rabies Day, please go to http://www.worldrabiesday.org/index_en.php
WHO information on rabies is available at: <http://www.who.int/rabies/epidemiology/en/>
and at <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs099/en/>