VETERINARY PROCEDURES FOR HANDLING RABIES SITUATIONS
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I. SUSPECT RABID ANIMALS
New Jersey Law

New Jersey Revised Statutes 26:4-78 states that: “Whenever a dog, cat, or other animal is affected by rabies or suspected of being affected by rabies or has been bitten by an animal known or suspected to be affected by rabies, the owner or person in charge of the animal or any person having knowledge thereof, shall notify the local board (i.e., local health department) having jurisdiction of the place where the animal is located.”

A directory of local health departments (LHDs) is posted online: www.localhealth.nj.gov

The Veterinarian’s Responsibility

If a practitioner determines that a domestic animal is displaying clinical signs of rabies or has been exposed to rabies, he or she must make a report to LHD. 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 nonbite 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 either mailed or faxed to the LHD.

If the animal is euthanized, the veterinarian should decapitate and store the head under refrigeration until it is delivered to the State Public Health and Environmental Laboratory (PHEL) for rabies testing. Decapitation should be done using gloves and eye protection to ensure that the veterinarian is not exposed to the rabies virus. Pursuant to medical waste regulations, specimens submitted to the PHEL CANNOT be returned to the owner.

If the animal is not euthanized, it is recommended that it be hospitalized or confined and observed or, for livestock, confined separately from other animals and observed. Precautions should be taken to prevent bites or exposures by isolating the animal, limiting staff contact and wearing gloves, eye protection, and other PPE whenever the animal must be handled. If the animal does have rabies, its condition will deteriorate rapidly, with death usually occurring within several days of onset. If the owner refuses to hospitalize a suspect rabid animal, immediately notify the LHD with jurisdiction where the animal is kept.

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 other exposure to a person or domestic animal, the animal should be euthanized and tested for rabies. Rabid wildlife may not show characteristic clinical signs of rabies and may survive the infection.

LHDs can address rabies-related questions and be a valuable resource to practitioners for other zoonotic disease situations. They can be contacted through the police department in the event of emergencies on nights, weekends, and holidays.
II. ANIMALS THAT HAVE BITTEN STAFF, PET OWNERS OR OTHER PEOPLE

New Jersey Law

New Jersey Statutes 26:4-78 through 80 require physicians, parents and guardians of children, and adults when they are not attended by a physician, to report animal bites to the LHD where they reside. Reports should include the contact information for the bite victim, information describing the biting animal and the contact information for the animal’s owner, if applicable. A directory of local health departments is posted online: www.localhealth.nj.gov

New Jersey Revised Statutes 26:4-82 authorizes the Health Officer to order the owner of a dog, cat or other domestic animal that has attacked or bitten a person to confine the animal upon the premises of the owner or at another place designated by the Health Officer for at least 10 days after the animal has attacked or bitten a person.

New Jersey Revised Statutes 26:4-86 authorizes an agent of the LHD to examine the confined animal at any time to determine if the animal has developed clinical signs of rabies. If the animal dies or is euthanized within the 10 day confinement period, the Health Officer may order laboratory testing for rabies to be performed.

The Veterinarian’s Responsibility

It is strongly recommended that veterinary practitioners report all known or suspected bites or exposures to person from a suspect rabid animal to their LHD. The report should include the animal owner’s contact information and a description of the biting animal, if applicable. LHDs have designated staff to investigate and confine biting animals for 10 days or arrange for rabies testing at the State laboratory, if the animal is clinically ill with signs of rabies. 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. LHD staff typically will issue the confinement notice to the animal owner and then return to release the confinement order 10 days later to ensure that the animal didn’t die or is not ill with signs of rabies.

It is recommended that practitioners verbally ask all owners of animals presented for euthanasia if anyone was bitten by the animal within 10 days and include this question on any euthanasia release form used in the practice. Laboratory testing would not be necessary if the animal completes the 10 day confinement before euthanasia. However, if a bite has occurred within 10 days of death, the Health Officer can, and usually will, order the animal to be tested for rabies, pursuant to their authority by N.J.R.S. 26:4-85. If euthanasia can be delayed until the 11th day after a bite, the animal would not need to be tested for rabies.

In the event a practitioner becomes aware of a bite AFTER euthanizing an animal, they should notify the Health Officer immediately and not freeze or dispose of the animal’s carcass until such action is approved by the Health Officer.

In situations where an animal owner is upset that his/her pet will be decapitated for rabies testing, practitioners can remove the brain, submit it for testing, and return the body of the animal to the owner in (almost) intact condition. Proper protective equipment should be used when removing the brain or decapitating the head to prevent exposure.
III PREPARATION OF SPECIMENS FOR LABORATORY SUBMISSION

Specimens should not be sent to the PHEL without consulting with the Local Health Department (LHD) where the rabies incident occurred.

A directory of LHDs is posted online: [www.localhealth.nj.gov](http://www.localhealth.nj.gov). LHDs can be contacted through the police department in the event of emergencies on nights, weekends, and holidays.

I PREPARATION OF SPECIMENS FOR SUBMISSION

Note: Once submitted to PHEL, specimen remains cannot be returned to veterinarians or animal owners under any circumstances.

1. All animals, except bats, must be decapitated prior to packaging and shipping to PHEL. ONLY THE HEAD OR BRAIN OF AN ANIMAL will be accepted for testing. Animal heads cannot be returned to the animal owner.

2. Bats may be submitted alive; however, they must be packaged in an escape-proof container (e.g. coffee can with tight fitting lid) and labeled: “CAUTION - LIVE BAT.” Under no circumstances should a bat, dead or alive, be wrapped in anything that could hinder access to it (e.g. a cloth towel, or packing material).

3. The specimen should not be frozen, as freezing delays the test process. Frozen specimens can still be tested, but freezing increases the probability that the sample will be unsatisfactory for testing. If samples are accidentally frozen, keep them frozen until delivery.

4. If the specimen is not being transported immediately, refrigerate it and pack as directed below before transport. Specimens that will be in transit for more than 12 hours should be placed in an insulated container. Improper packaging may lead to decomposition of the brain. Once the brain is decomposed, the specimen will be reported as “unsatisfactory.”

5. The specimen should be placed in a watertight container, such as a heavy plastic bag tightly secured, or a container (not glass) with a tight-fitting lid to prevent fluid leakage. This container should be placed in a larger waterproof unbreakable container, and the space between the 2 containers packed with coolant packs, NOT DRY ICE OR ICE IN BAGS. The specimen should be in a separate container from the cold packs. Leaking or improperly packaged specimens cannot be shipped to other public health laboratories.

Note: Couriers are instructed not to pick up specimens that are leaking or otherwise improperly packaged.
6. If individuals are exposed to brain tissue or fluid from the head or they cut themselves during the specimen preparation process, they should immediately wash the exposed areas thoroughly with soap and water. The name and telephone number of the exposed individual should be added to the Rabies Examination Request Form (VIR-16), noting the type of exposure that occurred.

7. The VIR-16 should be filled out completely and placed in an envelope accompanying the specimen; either securely attached to, or inside, the transport container. If put inside the transport container, the VIR-16 form should be in a separate sealed plastic bag from cold packs, preventing it from becoming wet. The VIR-16 form is posted online: [http://www.state.nj.us/health/forms/vir-16.dot](http://www.state.nj.us/health/forms/vir-16.dot)

8. Address specimens to:

   New Jersey Department of Health  
   Public Health and Environmental Laboratories (PHEL)  
   Rabies Laboratory  
   New Jersey State Police Headquarters  
   3 Schwarzkopf Drive  
   Ewing, NJ 08628

   **Note:** Do not address rabies specimens to specific individuals.

The State Police Headquarters Complex is located near Exit 1 of I-95, bordered by Upper Ferry Road and Route 175/River Road. For GPS and mapping devices, use “Trooper Drive, Ewing, NJ 08628” to locate the guard station at the entrance to the Complex. The guard can direct the driver to the PHEL Laboratory building for specimen submission.

For questions about rabies testing, specimen packaging and delivery, contact the PHEL via email: rabies.PHEL@doh.nj.gov. or call (609) 530-8416, (609) 671-6418, or (609) 671-6419.

For questions about evaluating potential human exposure to rabies, consideration of post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) and approval of high priority animal specimens, contact the CDS at (609) 826-5964 or 4872 during routine business hours and (609) 392-2020 after-hours (after 5pm or during weekends and holidays). Rabies specimen submission forms and instructions are posted on the PHEL website, [http://www.nj.gov/health/phel/](http://www.nj.gov/health/phel/).
II TRANSPORTATION OF SPECIMENS TO THE LABORATORY

It is the duty of the LHD to ensure that specimens are packaged properly and submitted to the laboratory on a timely basis. Specimens need to be delivered to the PHEL by 1:00 PM Thursday to ensure that testing is completed by Friday. If possible, animals should not be euthanized until prompt delivery has been arranged, so that rabies observation can continue if transport and testing cannot be performed in a timely manner (if the animal’s health improves, testing may not be necessary).

The loading dock of the PHEL is open from 8:30 AM to 4:00 PM on non-holiday weekdays to receive specimens. Rabies specimens accessioned prior to 1:00 PM on a working (non-weekend or state holiday) should have results reported on the next working day. Results are faxed at the completion of testing directly to the Health Officer with jurisdiction over the case.

Note: The New Jersey Department of Agriculture, Division of Animal Health (609-292-3965) can assist with delivery of livestock rabies specimens.

The following methods of transportation can be utilized:

1. Hand delivery - This is the fastest and most reliable method of delivery to ensure the quickest test result turnover time for high priority specimens. If the situation is urgent, the owner of the affected animal or the person bitten or exposed hand deliver the specimen. Alternatively, a friend or family member can deliver the specimen. Specimens can be delivered on a 24-hour basis (see Section III).

2. Private delivery services - There are numerous private delivery services that will transport specimens. Specimens must always be sent for arrival on non-holiday weekdays.

   Note: Express Mail, and other delivery services offered through the U.S. Postal Service (USPS), should NOT BE used because rabies specimens are not classified as “mailable”. Specimens delivered by USPS have decomposed during transit and therefore could not be tested.

3. State Courier - There is a courier system that picks up laboratory specimens from various locations throughout the State and delivers them to the PHEL. LHDs can assist with utilizing these couriers. Because courier pick-up schedules can change without notice and utilizing the state courier system may result in a 1-3 day delivery delay compared to other methods of transportation, couriers should only be used for surveillance, animal exposure, or very low risk human exposure specimens. The entity dropping off the specimen at a courier pick-up location is responsible to verify that the specimen was subsequently picked up and delivered to the PHEL. If there is a question or problem with a courier, please contact Fenton Snell at PHEL (609-530-8519).
4. In some circumstances (e.g., high-risk human exposures), LHDs may be able to assign staff to deliver specimens to the rabies laboratory.

III DELIVERY TO THE PHEL

Enter the State Police Headquarters Complex via Trooper Drive off Route 175/River Road. The State Police guard will direct the driver to the PHEL facility. Follow the directions for delivery to an intercom outside the PHEL building and tell the security guard that you are delivering a rabies specimen. The guard will raise the gate and the person delivering shall proceed to the Loading Dock/Specimen Receiving area in the rear of the building, where the security guard will facilitate specimen submission.

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