Rabies is 100% fatal, but also 100% preventable — experts

United News - English Edition · 12 Mar 2025 · 2

This disease, while deadly, is a preventable one. A veterinarian tells us more about what the World health Organization calls “a serious public health problem,” and how we can all work together to address it.



According to the World Health Organization, rabies is a “viral, zoonotic, neglected tropical disease that causes tens of thousands of deaths annually, with 40% of cases being children under 15.”

Once the virus infects the central nervous system and clinical symptoms appear, the WHO says rabies becomes fatal in 100% of cases. It adds, “Dog bites and scratches cause 99% of human rabies cases.”

Best prevention

Double-duty dogs at Westminster Dog Show aid victims of LA fires, war

“The best prevention is to get our pets vaccinated,” says Dr. Rey del Napoles, DVM, the division chief of Animal Care and Disease Control at the Quezon City Veterinary Department (QCVD). “It’s the most cost-effective way to prevent human death.”

In 2024, the QCVD vaccinated more than 212,000 pets against rabies. Based on a 2017 survey, it is estimated that the pet population in Quezon City is about 20% of the human population. This means there are about 600,000 pets for the 3.2 million people in Quezon City.

“It’s a race against time,” says del Napoles. And to run this race, the QCVD has been going house-to-house vaccinating pets since last year. “Umaabot kami ng isang buwan sa isang barangay, para lang makapag-vaccinate.”

(“We spend as much as one month in a barangay just to be able to vaccinate.”)

“Kung tuluy-tuloy ang efforts natin na mag-intensify ng vaccination, wala na tayo dapat rabies sa humans. After all, ang goals natin for the global commitment ‘Zero by 30’, ibig sabihin nito wala na dapat taong mamamatay by 2030 dahil sa kagat ng aso,” del Napoles says.
(“If our efforts to intensify vaccination continue, we should no longer have rabies in humans. After all, our goals for the global commitment ‘Zero by 30’ means there should no longer be any human dying because of dog bites by 2030.”)
From 2022 to 2024, Quezon City recorded two deaths caused by rabies annually.
“Meron pa tayong five years na hopefully ‘yung dalawa maging isa, at ‘yung isa ay magiging zero na,” says del Napoles.
(“We still have five years. Hopefully, two will become one, and one will go down to zero.”)
When should you get an anti-rabies shot? Del Napoles laments there are still some Filipinos who believe in folk remedies against rabies, like the tandok method, where a deer horn is used to suck what they mistakenly view as venom from the wound, and the use of buhay na bato. Crystal-like and opaque in appearance and found in riverbeds, the stone is placed on the wound, and by the time it falls, it means it has sucked the poison from it.
But these are ineffective.
Of the tandok method, del Napoles says, “kapag maraming laway na ang pumasok sa sugat, ibig sabihin nito maraming viruses ang pumasok sa bloodstream and then dadami na siya sa ugat natin until makakarating na siya sa brain. And that’s when the
symptoms will start manifesting and then irreversible na ang symptoms,” says del Napoles.
(“If a lot of saliva gets in the wound, this means that many viruses enter the bloodstream, then it multiplies in our veins until it ends up in the brain. And that’s when the symptoms will start manifesting, and the symptoms are irreversible.”)
Get an anti-rabies shot instead.
Del Napoles says it’s best to get vaccinated if there is a break in your skin and you aren’t sure whether the animal’s saliva entered that break.
You should also get vaccinated if you are wounded by an animal you are not familiar with, especially if you don’t know its vaccination status.
“We should get post-exposure treatment right away kasi nga we don’t want na it will come in too late. Kasi once the symptoms will start manifesting, irreversible na po. Wala na pong atrasan. Dito pa naman sa atin, wala tayong euthanasia on humans. So we will have to wait through the painful death process,” del Napoles says.
(“We should get post-exposure treatment right away because we don’t want it to come in too late. Because once the symptoms start manifesting, they are irreversible. There is no going back. Especially here in the Philippines, we don’t have euthanasia for humans, so we will have to wait through the painful death process.”)
Emergency Response
According to the WHO, the first step in the emergency response to rabies exposure is “extensive wound washing with water and soap for at least 15 minutes soon after an exposure.”
Vaccination is the second step.
If, however, you sustain a wound from your pet and your pet is fully vaccinated against rabies (this means its vaccines are updated), there is the “least probability” that it has rabies.

Don't panic, del Napoles advises. "Instead, i-observe natin sila within ten to 14 days. Kapag namatay po sila on a natural cause... or... nagpakita ng symptoms of rabies, that's when we worry. Dun pa lang tayo mag-seek ng medical attention," says del Napoles.
("Instead, let's observe them within ten to 14 days. If they die of natural causes or show symptoms of rabies, that's when we worry. That's when we seek medical attention.")
According to the Quezon City government, other signs that an animal has rabies include aggression, salivating excessively, and the inability to eat or drink water.
In Quezon City, there are six bite centers, one bite center per district, where you can get your anti-rabies vaccine for free.
Project 6 Health Center in District 1 Batasan Hills Super Health Center in District 2
Socorro Health Center in District 3 Tatalon Health Center in District 4 Kaligayahan Health Center in District 5 Melchora Aquino Health Center in District 6
Creating a safe community together
But there is also such a thing as being too cautious about rabies prevention. A huge misconception, says del Napoles, is that dogs are born with rabies.
"Meron pa rin talaga tayo na pagkakuha ng tuta, ipipilit nang bakunahan for rabies. And we always will tell them, 'Let's wait for three months.'Although merong suggestion si FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization) na pwedeng bakunahan at an early age, kaso lang kailangan siyang ulitin within six months kasi nga baka hindi tumalab 'yung unang bakuna. So that's for the comfort reasons [or peace of mind]. So if you go to the private for that, doble-doble ang babayaran mo," he says.
("Some people really insist on vaccinating puppies for rabies as soon as they get them. And we always will tell them, 'Let's wait for three months.' Although the FAO suggests that you can get them vaccinated at an early age, but you have to get them vaccinated again within six months because the first vaccine might not have worked. That's for comfort reasons [or peace of mind]. So if you go to the private for that, you'll pay double.")
Del Napoles also read a recent study on cats which states that they are not a natural host of rabies, but accidental ones. "Marahil na-expose lang sila sa rabid dog o nahabol sila ng asong may rabies, nahawa sila accidentally. So ganun din po ang baboy, ang baka, pwede rin pong magkaroon ng rabies kapag nakagat ng aso na may rabies."
("Perhaps they were exposed to a rabid dog or a rabid dog chased after them and infected them accidentally. So it's the same for pigs and cows, they can also get rabies if they are bitten by rabid dogs.")
Nevertheless, del Napoles stresses what he has been talking about all along: There is no reason for any person to die because of rabies.
"We've been investing so much na mapuksa ang rabies. And the only thing we can do po is to get our pets vaccinated. If you want to contribute to a very safe community po, we should invest in getting our pets vaccinated... Let's help each other in creating a safe environment where malaya tayong naglalakad na wala tayong kinakatakutan na baka makagat ako ng aso at magkaroon ako ng rabies," he says.