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Rabies in Horses: Exposure and Clinical Signs



Rabies can look like anything. Typically, horses develop neurologic signs such as abnormal (uncoordinated or ataxic) gait.

Photo: Stephanie L. Church, Editor-in-Chief

In Eastern states, the most likely way by far for horses to contract rabies is to be bitten by a rabid raccoon so that saliva infected with virus is injected under the skin. This is most likely in a pasture, especially a pasture bordering woods, but horses have been bitten even in stalls. In the middle section of the country and in some Pacific coast states a rabid skunk is the likely culprit. There are also several pockets of fox-associated rabies in different parts of the country. In most of the United States, many species of bats (not just vampire bats) also may transmit rabies to horses but this is much less likely. Rabid raccoons, skunks and foxes change their behavior so that they are likely to wander out into a horse pasture and make a bee-line for the horse. Horses being curious animals are also likely to investigate the raccoons so that the horse gets bitten on the nose or even on the legs. Signs are more likely to occur quickly (within weeks) if bitten on the nose and much longer if bitten on a foot.

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Rabies can look like anything. Typically, horses develop neurologic signs that may include behavioral changes, difficulty swallowing, abnormal (uncoordinated or ataxic) gait, paralysis of the limbs, and hypersalivation. Occasionally, horses may appear colicky or have an obscure lameness. Fever is often a feature of the disease.

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