

SORRENTO TRAVEL CLINIC FACT SHEET

RABIES

Rabies is a serious viral disease affecting animals and humans, prevalent in most countries throughout the world. Currently the list of rabies-free countries includes Australia, New Zealand, the South Pacific islands including Guam, Hawaii, Singapore, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, Japan and Taiwan.

HOW THE DISEASE IS TRANSMITTED

The rabies virus is transmitted to humans through the saliva of an infected mammal. The most common animals involved are dogs or other canines and bats, but any mammal including cats, raccoons, monkeys, is capable of transmitting the virus. Although an animal bite is the usual way in which the virus gets into the body, because the virus is present in saliva even a scratch which breaks the skin is dangerous. The general rule is that in a country where rabies is present any bite or scratch from any mammal which breaks the skin, however small, needs immediate medical attention.

THE DISEASE

From the site of the bite or scratch the virus moves along the nerves to the brain. The time taken for this to happen varies enormously - it can take days, weeks, months or even years. This has two implications. When symptoms appear the infecting incident may have been long forgotten leading to a delay in diagnosis, but more importantly, "post-exposure immunisation" to prevent the disease developing is worthwhile even long after exposure. Invasion of the brain leads to inflammation (encephalitis) which is widespread and unrelenting. Once symptoms appear death is almost inevitable even with special intensive care.

PREVENTION

Even with the best medical care cures of established rabies are rare. Therefore prevention is of prime importance. Avoidance of animal bites is paramount and, for most travellers is not difficult. For travellers at high risk of animal bites such as animal handlers, vets, farm workers immunisation should be considered.

VACCINATION

Modern vaccines are safe, effective and relatively pain-free with little in the way of side-effects. Three injections over a period of four weeks are required. Even with this "pre-exposure" immunisation the World Health Organisation recommends a further one or two doses after a possible exposure to make sure that immunity is high.

Because the vaccination course is expensive and the risk of infection is very small for most tourists, immunisation is frequently declined. In such a case should there be an animal bite the injury must be thoroughly cleansed (with antiseptic if available) and medical attention sought as soon as possible- preferably within 24 hours. The course of treatment then involves the use of anti-rabies immunoglobulin to provide some degree of protection through passive immunity while full immunity is induced by a series of 5 injections. Immunoglobulin is very expensive and in general is in short supply so that it may not be available when needed.