

## Animal health update: Wildlife rabies and recent cases of imported canine rabies in Ontario

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Since July 2021, two cases of rabies have been confirmed in dogs in Ontario that had been recently imported from Iran through rescue organizations. The first case was detected in July 2021 in an adult dog that developed signs of an ocular issue and increased drooling that progressed over two days. The dog was euthanized within 12 days of importation. The second case was detected in January 2022 in a dog that was imported at the age of approximately 3 months in June 2021. The dog developed abnormal twitching, which progressed to fulminant neurological signs over six days, at which point the dog was euthanized. These cases each led to extensive investigations involving multiple public health units and 49 individuals received rabies post-exposure prophylaxis as a result of contact with the dogs. Both dogs had been vaccinated for rabies in Iran prior to importation with CANVAC-R, which is not a licensed rabies vaccine in Canada. In both cases, the rabies virus involved was confirmed to be a canine variant known to circulate in Iran.

On July 15, 2021, the US Centers for Disease Control implemented a ban on importation of dogs from over 100 countries considered high-risk for canine rabies, including Iran. There is potential for dogs from these countries to be redirected through Canada, which may increase the risk of dogs carrying rabies entering Ontario.

Veterinarians who examine a dog, cat, or ferret recently imported into Canada should acquire and scrutinize a copy of the animal's previous vaccination record and/or health certificate and ensure the animal is currently vaccinated against rabies if it is over 3 months of age. If there is any question regarding the validity of the animal's documentation or the reliability of any previous vaccinations (in terms of product used, route of administration, age at administration or any other concerns), then the animal should be revaccinated for rabies as soon as possible, and a new vaccination certificate issued by the attending veterinarian. Under the *Health Protection and Promotion Act* (Reg. 567), previous vaccination using products that are not licenced for use in Canada is considered invalid in Ontario.

Remember: Vaccination prior to importation is intended to help protect dogs from rabies exposure after arrival in Canada. It does not reliably prevent rabies in a dog that was exposed to the virus prior to vaccination and import. The typical incubation period for rabies in a dog can be up to 6 months.

Since December 2015, a total of 494 cases of raccoon variant rabies have been confirmed in southwestern Ontario in raccoons and skunks, as well as in two stray cats, one red fox, one llama and one dog. All cases detected in 2021 (two raccoons, 12 skunks) were from the Niagara region. From December 2015 to the end of 2018, 21 cases of fox variant rabies were confirmed in Perth, Huron, Waterloo and Wellington counties, including in seven bovines, 13 skunks and one red fox. Since 2016, the annual number of cases of rabies in bats has ranged from 20 to 41. For details and maps of confirmed cases of rabies in Ontario, visit [Rabies cases](#).

Veterinarians should always be the first point of contact for animal owners with concerns about their animals' health, including potential rabies exposures. **Animal owners who contact OMAFRA directly concerning potential rabies exposures will be advised to contact their local veterinarian.**

Veterinarians should contact OMAFRA for assistance with risk assessments, sample submission or post-exposure management, as needed. Veterinarians can submit a request for assistance online at the [Rabies response request form](#). Requests submitted within business hours will receive a response the same day, typically within 1-2 hours. Requests can also be submitted outside of business hours and will receive a response the next business day; interim triage guidance is provided on the webpage. If you require assistance with completing the online form due to limited internet access or due to any other accessibility issue, please contact the OMAFRA Agricultural Information Contact Centre at [1-877-424-1300](tel:1-877-424-1300) (option 1) during business hours (weekdays 8:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.).

The OMAFRA rabies website includes detailed information for veterinarians about rabies response in Ontario, including a [risk assessment flowchart](#).

Veterinarians need to remain vigilant for cases of domestic animal exposure to potentially rabid animals. There continues to be a risk of incursion of fox rabies from northern regions of the province and of raccoon rabies from New York State. Contact with rabid bats is a risk in all regions. The best protection against rabies for both domestic animals and people is to avoid contact with potentially rabid wildlife and to keep domestic animals up-to-date on rabies vaccination. Rabies vaccination for dogs, cats and ferrets is a regulatory requirement in all health units in the province as of July 2018. Rabies vaccination is also required for horses, cattle and sheep that have contact with members of the general public and should be considered for any livestock in high-risk areas. If you suspect a domestic animal may have recently been exposed to a potentially rabid animal and it is not possible

to have the offending animal tested, it should be vaccinated (or revaccinated) as soon as possible regardless of the pet's or livestock's vaccination status at the time.

Reminder of whom to contact in cases of potential rabies exposure:

1. Human exposure to a potentially rabid animal: Local Public Health Unit
2. Domestic animal exposure to a potentially rabid animal, no human exposure:  
Local veterinarian
  - Animal owners should contact their local veterinarian as the first step for any animal health concerns.
  - Veterinarians can submit a request for assistance online at the [Rabies response request form](#).
3. Abnormal wildlife, no domestic animal exposure, no human exposure:  
Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNRF) or Canadian Wildlife Health Cooperative (CWHC)
  1. For assistance with a live animal, contact a local animal/wildlife control agency first.
  2. For dead terrestrial wildlife, call the MNRF Rabies Infoline ([1-888-574-6656](tel:1-888-574-6656)).
  3. If a freshly dead bat is found, consider contacting the CWHC ([1-866-673-4781](tel:1-866-673-4781)).

## Additional information

- [OMAFRA Rabies in Ontario website](#)
- [Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry Rabies website](#)
- [Public Health Unit Locator](#)
- *Ontario Health Protection and Promotion Act* (R.R.O 1990) regulations:
  - [Communicable diseases - General \(Reg. 557\)](#)
  - [Rabies immunization \(Reg. 567\)](#)
- [Canadian Food Inspection Agency: Information on owning, importing and travelling with dogs](#)

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