

How do I check my rabies titer or get a booster? *By Elisabeth Lawaczeck, State Public Health Veterinarian*

Most veterinarians are vaccinated for rabies while in veterinary school. However, few may be aware of their immune status. Per guidelines from the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) titled “Human Rabies Prevention”, serological testing every two years is recommended for veterinarians and veterinary clinic staff in rabies enzootic areas. I consider all of Arizona as a “rabies enzootic area”, due to the level of skunk and fox rabies in the majority of the state, and the large variety and numbers of bats which we have in our state. If the titer is below the acceptable level, a booster is recommended. Per the ACIP guidelines, “Minimum acceptable level is complete virus neutralization at a 1:5 serum dilution by the rapid fluorescent focus inhibition test” (RFFIT). Serology via enzyme linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) is not recommended! Per staff from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the RFFIT is the only valid method at this time to verify rabies virus neutralizing antibodies.

Titers should be checked through primary care physicians or occupational health clinics. The blood needs to be sent to a laboratory which runs the RFFIT test. A list of laboratories which provide RFFIT testing is provided.

Then, if you need a rabies booster vaccination, there are a few options, depending on what part of the state you live. A few large veterinary clinics have an account set up with an occupational health clinic such as Concentra Medical, which carry the rabies vaccine for pre-exposure prophylaxis. Primary care providers can also try to order the vaccine for their veterinary staff patients. The insert provides information on pre- and post- exposure prophylaxis, with phone numbers of the vaccine manufacturers, which can be given to a physician.

In Cochise, Coconino, Gila, Mohave, and Yavapai counties, veterinarians and their staff who reside in these counties can receive pre-exposure prophylaxis vaccination for rabies through the county health department immunization program, for a fee. These county health departments will usually have to order the rabies vaccine for each request. Pinal and La Paz county health departments are still considering providing pre-exposure rabies vaccination to veterinarians. In Santa Cruz County, the Mariposa Community Health Centers in Nogales and Patagonia provide pre- and post- exposure vaccination for rabies.

If all of the above fails, a veterinarian can get a medical order from their primary care physician and go to an emergency room to be vaccinated, after checking with the hospital pharmacy to ensure that they have rabies vaccine in stock.

To date (December 21st) in 2005, 167 animals have been confirmed to be infected with rabies, which is a new record. The highest number of lab confirmed rabid animals reported in one year was previously 143, set in 2002. Two of the rabid animals in 2005 were pet cats, one from Coconino County and one from Santa Cruz County. Multiple veterinary personnel involved with the care of both cats were advised to receive rabies post-exposure prophylaxis.

If an exposure to a rabid animal occurs, personnel who were previously vaccinated for rabies with a cell culture vaccine will only have to receive two boosters of rabies vaccine, instead of five doses of vaccine and human rabies immunoglobulin.

For questions related to this article, such as how to contact a county health department immunization program, please contact Elisabeth Lawaczeck, State Public Health Veterinarian at the Arizona Department of Health Services, at (602) 364-4562.