

## Rabies Update

Rabies is a viral illness affecting a wide range of domestic and wild animals including dogs, monkeys and bats. Human infection usually occurs through the bite of an infected animal via its saliva. Infection can also occur from a penetrating scratch or licking of broken skin and mucous membranes. The disease is almost invariably fatal.

Almost all the countries in the Asia Pacific region except Singapore, Malaysia, Japan, Australia and New Zealand have endemic rabies. There is currently an outbreak of rabies in the popular tourist island of Bali. As of early January this year, there have been 6 deaths there and reports of up to ten new infections per day. Despite a programme which has vaccinated 24000 dogs and culled 1000 strays, the disease has spread from the southern part of the island into the tourist area of Kuta. No tourists have reported being bitten as yet.

Rabies vaccination is not a requirement for entry into any country. Travelers spending increased time outdoors such as hikers, cyclists and campers may be at increased risk. Children are also at higher risk as they tend to play with animals and may not report bites. Travelers should avoid contact with free-roaming animals, especially dogs and cats. Spelunkers or cavers should not handle bats.

Vaccination against rabies is given for two situations:

1. to protect those who are at risk of exposure to rabies (pre-exposure vaccination)
2. to prevent clinical rabies after exposure has occurred (post-exposure prophylaxis)

The vaccines used for these situations are the same. Three injections spread over 3-4 weeks are given for pre-exposure vaccination. Post-exposure prophylaxis depends on the type of injury and may require the administration of rabies immunoglobulin (RIG). RIG is in short supply worldwide and may not be available even in major urban centres in many dog rabies-infected countries.

If you are planning a trip which places you at increased risk of rabies exposure, please seek the advice of your doctor at least a month before departure.