

## **To all stock owners, Rabies Alert!**

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I love dogs... up to a point. My caution with them perhaps comes from being brought up in an apostolic sect family that considered dogs to be "unholy". But maybe my discomfort with them stems from *that*, and something else.

Well, love them or not, I have had encounters with dogs over the years that has not made me change my mind. But primarily you can say it is due to rabies. Rabies is closely associated with canine animals, both domesticated and wild. Canine animals (dogs, foxes, jackals, hyenas etc) are reservoirs of the rabies virus, and that is an important fact to have at the back of the mind of everyone, not just farmers or owners of animals.

### **Encounter 1: Karoi 2005**

I was on duty at the District Veterinary Office when a gentleman came with his dog on his shoulders, its tongue lolling out and saliva dribbling out.

"What's supposed to ail our friend today?" I asked cheerfully. The gentleman put his sizable burden down and explained.

"Well, he ate some fish bones which are stuck at his throat, so he is unable to close his mouth", he said with absolute conviction.

I wanted to help. But I was scared stiff, and not of the passive dog. I slowly put on some latex gloves, dragging out the motion, all the time alert for the arrival of a senior officer. Soon as a senior officer came around, I did an Olympic dash out of the room! Something did not look right, but I could not put my hand to it. I never got round to touching the animal!

### **Encounter 2: Norton 2016**

Unlike me, my brother loves dogs. He has kept a variety of them at his durawalled house in Norton over the years. But he never gets round to have them vaccinated against rabies, or any disease for that matter! The durawall has some holes, and the dogs sneak out sometimes in the evenings. In 2016, he had a beautiful black mongrel called "Bingo".

One evening we heard an almighty scuffle in the night, loud dog wailing and within minutes Bingo came inside the durawall, limping badly from a nasty mauling.

It seemed to be recovering well, when early one morning my brother woke me up. "Something is wrong is with the dog". My heart skipped a beat as I rushed outside to see. Bingo stared unseeingly at me, eyes unfocused, saliva dribbling, head tilted to its side, hardly able to stand. It was the saddest sight.

Read about my other encounters here: <https://livestockmatters.blog/2019/04/03/when-disease-strikes/>

## **Rabies**

Rabies is a viral disease associated with canine animals. Canine animals (dogs, foxes, jackals) are reservoirs of the disease. This means these animals are preferred by the virus and can survive with the disease for a period without dying from it, thereby helping to spread it.

However, more importantly, rabies can affect any animal, including humans and other domestic animals. So it is a **zoonotic** disease.

In dogs, rabies is more important because of the close association that exists between dogs, humans and other domestic animals. It also means that the easiest way of controlling rabies is through **vaccination of dogs**, the animals which are most likely to introduce the disease to your farm or family.

### **Signs: two forms**

Rabies occurs in two forms: **furious rabies** and **dumb rabies**. The furious form is the classic one characterised by madness, frenzy, aggression and mindless biting and eating objects. It is also associated with the urge to run: the pads literally wear out. The dog trots, biting everyone and everything in its path.

Another give away is **change of behaviour** of any sort: a normally aggressive dog can become passive, and a normally passive dog can become really aggressive. Wild animals may lose their fear of humans. So if you see a fox approach you, be very very cautious!

In dumb rabies, the changes in the brain causes a progressive paralysis the animal's muscles as well. The animal is practically "dumb".

In both forms of the disease, the throat muscles become paralyzed, resulting in the animal not able to swallow its saliva. This causes saliva dribbling or frothing that accompanies rabies.

### **Transmission**

The major transmission (95%) is by a bite by a dog or other canine. The disease is transmitted via **saliva** of a rabid animal. So, the infective agent is saliva or the brain of an infected animal, not the biting per se. This is critical, because it means you can also contract rabies without being bitten. If for some reason, your eyes, mouth or skin opening is contaminated by the saliva of a rabid animal, you run the risk of contracting the disease.

It is also important to realise that you can become infected by the saliva from infected animals which are not yet showing signs of the disease. That is why it is important to trace everyone who had **contact** with a rabid animal and have them treated.

**Treatment:** None. Once an animal is showing signs of the disease, it cannot be treated. The end result is death. Once an animal starts to show signs of rabies, it will die within 11 days.

If you see any dog showing suspicious signs of rabies, tie it up immediately and call the Vet department or police. Either way, a rabid animal will not live beyond 11 days from the moment it starts showing signs of rabies.

### **Prevention: Vaccination**

The best way to prevent rabies is to vaccinate your dogs. In Zimbabwe, the vaccination protocol for rabies is:

- 1st vaccination: puppies 3-4 months of age
- 2nd vaccination: 9-12 months of age
- 3rd vaccination: 3 years
- Every 3 years thereafter. Though in practice, dog owners generally prefer yearly re-vaccinations, just to be safe.

Get all your neighbours to get their dogs vaccinated. The World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) says that vaccination of 70% of dogs allows rabies to be vaccinated from an area. Stray dogs have to be especially eradicated.

### **Dogs of unknown vaccination status**

Have the animal vaccinated within a week of getting it. Re-vaccinate 6 months later, and yearly thereafter.

### **Human cases**

If a human is bitten by a rabid animal or a dog of unknown status, it is important to get to the clinic at once. It is crucial to wash the bitten part with soap and lots of water. The virus moves through the nerves to the brain, so if you are bitten on the head, that is an immediate emergency because the virus has a short journey to your brain or central nervous system. If you are bitten on your toe, you have more time to get treatment.

Humans exposed to the disease can get anti-rabies treatment at hospitals. In developing countries, this drug is not easily available, that's why it is important to vaccinate dogs. Human anti-rabies is expensive too when available.

Humans whose job exposes them to possible infection can be vaccinated against the disease.

Sorry for frightening you. But rabies is a real risk in developing countries of the tropics. Forewarned is forearmed.

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