

Undoubtedly, animal lovers find it difficult to stay without their pets when out of town, city or the country. Many even have the habit of taking their pets with them particularly when travelling for business or leisure.

Whilst rules and regulations may be less stringent when moving pets within towns and cities at the national level, there are a set of rules and conditions which apply when moving pets from one country to the other.

In Fiji, the Biosecurity Authority of Fiji (BAF) being the agency protecting the shores from the introduction, establishment and spread of exotic diseases does allow cats and dogs from abroad, however with certain terms and conditions in place.

BAF does allow cats and dogs into Fiji, however proper procedures need to be followed prior to getting them into the country. It is to be noted that cats and dogs that have recently visited overseas countries may have come into contact with other animals carrying exotic animal pests and diseases including zoonotic diseases such as rabies. This may pose biosecurity as well as human health risks.

Fiji is recognized as a **rabies-free** country and BAF endeavors to maintain the country's status as being free from this fatal zoonotic disease.

Given that cats and dogs are easily susceptible to rabies disease, it is imperative for people to know the severity of the disease. In this week's feature we take a look into what is Rabies and how it is transmitted and spread.

What is Rabies?

Rabies is a fatal viral disease called *lyssavirus* that affects the central nervous system of mammals commonly causing encephalitis. It is also a zoonotic disease which means it can be transmitted to humans. Rabies has been recognised for centuries and is a disease listed in the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) Terrestrial Animal Health Code and must be reported to the OIE.

Where is the disease found?

The rabies virus is present in most parts of the world. Some countries have implemented vigilant control measures and succeeded in eradicating while in some countries, the disease remains endemic. The infection of domestic livestock could have economic consequences in some countries and the occurrence of rabies in domestic dogs poses a threat to humans that is of major concern in several developing countries. There is a risk to travellers in areas where rabies occurs.

How is the disease transmitted and spread?

Rabies is transmitted through the saliva of rabies infected animal. Infection occurs primarily via bite wounds, or infected saliva entering an open cut or wound or mucous membrane, such as those in the mouth, nasal cavity or eyes. Infection through inhalation of the virus has been documented, for example, in the environment of a densely populated bat cave. The virus will generally remain at the entry site for a period of time before travelling along the nerves to the brain. In the brain, the virus multiplies quickly, resulting in clinical signs. The virus then moves from the brain along nerves to the salivary glands. The period of time before clinical signs appear in an infected animal can vary depending on the strain of virus and entry point. Thus the incubation period for rabies varies from several days to several months. As the symptoms become obvious, the disease at this stage is considered to be fatal for both animals and humans (Source: World Organization for Animal Health, OIE).

It is thus important to realise that the disease can be transmitted via the saliva of an infected animal to other animals and humans before the onset of clinical signs of the disease in the infected animal.

What to do if you have encountered rabies infected animal?

Any encounter with a domestic or wild animal where a bite is received must be investigated. It is important to immediately wash any bite wound or exposed surface with soap and water and report the incident to a doctor or hospital emergency department. The risk

of rabies transmission must be evaluated based on the nature of the encounter, species of animal involved, prevalence of rabies in the area, and evaluation of the vaccination and clinical status of the animal and its availability for diagnostic testing. Occupational groups regularly in contact with animals for example, veterinarians, animal control and wildlife officers should obtain protection through pre-exposure vaccination. Abattoir personnel, particularly in endemic areas, must take preventive actions to prevent infection from saliva, salivary gland and nervous tissue of infected animals. Infection does not occur by consumption of meat from a rabid animal.

What are the clinical signs of the disease?

Clinical signs of rabies in animals vary depending on the effect of the virus on the brain. Typical signs include sudden behavioural changes and progressive paralysis leading to death. In some cases, however, an animal may die rapidly without demonstrating significant clinical signs. Animals may get anxious, highly excitable and/or aggressive, depressed and death results from paralysis. In humans, early signs can include fever or headache. As the disease progresses, symptoms may include confusion, depression, sleepiness, agitation or paralysis of the face, throat and neck. Death generally results from progressive paralysis.

What is being done to prevent or control this disease?

It is imperative for BAF to take all proactive measures to ensure this exotic disease does not enter our shores. To prevent the introduction of rabies in Fiji, strict animal import measures are in place by BAF. Import of dogs and cats without the health certificate and import permit is not allowed into Fiji. For example, pet dogs or cats on board yacht or fishing vessels are not allowed in Fiji however they can stay on the yacht and vessel under strict supervision of the Biosecurity officers (BSO). The animals will be bonded for the period of stay in Fiji.

Further, in order to create awareness regarding the deadly disease, BAF recently celebrated the World Rabies Day on 27 September, 2019. The event was celebrated in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture and Fiji National University.



While rabies is a 100% preventable disease, more than 59,000 people die from the disease around the world each year. Hence, the World Rabies Day was an opportune time for BAF to reflect on its efforts to continue working with its stakeholders towards keeping this deadly disease out of the country.

For Further Information, Please Contact:

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