

The Importance of Rabies Prophylaxis for Veterinary Students

Veterinary school is the first step in your professional journey. It can be an exciting time, but it also comes with many new responsibilities and potential hazards. One of the most critical health measures for veterinarians, especially for students entering the field, is rabies prophylaxis. Rabies, a deadly viral disease, poses a significant risk to veterinarians due to their frequent contact with animals. Ensuring you are protected against rabies is not just a precaution; it's a necessity.

Understanding Rabies and Its Risks

Rabies is a viral disease that affects the central nervous system, leading to brain inflammation and, if untreated, death.¹ The virus is primarily transmitted through the saliva of infected animals via bites or scratches.² For veterinarians, the risk of exposure is notably higher given their direct interaction with a wide variety of animals, some of which may be carriers of the virus.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), rabies causes approximately 59,000 deaths worldwide each year.³ While rabies is rare in the United States, the threat to veterinarians remains real. Veterinarians in the U.S. will likely be exposed to rabies at some point during their career, highlighting the importance of preventive measures.

CDC Guidelines for Rabies Prophylaxis

The CDC provides clear guidelines for rabies pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) for individuals at high risk, including veterinarians and veterinary students. Here are the key recommendations:

- 1. Pre-Exposure Vaccination:** The rabies pre-exposure vaccination regimen consists of two doses given on days 0 and 7 plus follow-up titer check(s) (frequency varies based on risk category).⁴ This series of vaccinations provides a baseline level of immunity, making post-exposure treatment more effective.
- 2. Serologic Testing:** The CDC advises regular serologic testing (every 2 years) for veterinarians to ensure they maintain adequate levels of rabies antibodies.⁵ If antibody levels are found to be insufficient, a booster dose may be necessary.⁴
- 3. Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP):** Even if vaccinated, immediate medical attention and additional doses of rabies vaccine are required after any potential exposure. PEP is crucial to prevent the onset of the disease.⁶

Rabies in the Veterinary Field

Veterinarians are on the front lines of rabies prevention and control, often diagnosing and managing cases in animals. Unfortunately, this role also places them at higher risk. The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) underscores the necessity of rabies vaccinations for veterinary professionals.⁷ Rabies exposure incidents are more common in veterinary settings, with bites and scratches from unvaccinated animals being the primary source.¹

In the veterinary field, reported cases of rabies exposure highlight the critical need for preventive measures. Veterinarians frequently encounter wildlife and domestic animals that could be rabies carriers. These interactions make pre-exposure vaccinations a vital component of veterinary education and practice.

AVMA VetSTEPP™: Supporting Veterinary Students

Recognizing the importance of protecting veterinary students, programs like [AVMA VetSTEPP™ \(Veterinary Student Essential Protection Package\)](#) offer invaluable support. VetSTEPP™ provides comprehensive insurance coverage, including health benefits specifically designed for veterinary students—**starting at just \$25 per month.**⁸

One of the significant benefits of VetSTEPP™ is its coverage for rabies prophylaxis. Insured students can receive **up to \$800 to help offset the cost of rabies shots and/or titers,**⁸ which are required by many veterinary schools.

Conclusion

As you prepare to enter veterinary school, it's essential to prioritize your health and safety. Rabies prophylaxis is a critical step in ensuring you are protected against a potentially deadly disease. By following the health guidelines and taking advantage of programs like AVMA VetSTEPP™, you can help safeguard your health while pursuing your passion for veterinary medicine.

**Stay informed, stay protected, and focus
on becoming the best veterinarian you can be!**

- ¹Rabies. *American Veterinary Medical Association*. (n.d.). <https://www.avma.org/resources-tools/one-health/rabies>
- ²Rabies. *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*. May 2024. https://www.cdc.gov/rabies/about/?CDC_AAref_Val=https://www.cdc.gov/rabies/location/world/index.html
- ³Global burden of dog-transmitted human rabies. *World Health Organization*. (n.d.). <https://www.who.int/teams/control-of-neglected-tropical-diseases/rabies/epidemiology-and-burden>
- ⁴Rabies Pre-exposure Vaccination. *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*. May 2024. https://www.cdc.gov/rabies/hcp/prevention-recommendations/pre-exposure-vaccination.html?CDC_AAref_Val=https://www.cdc.gov/rabies/prevention/pre-exposure_vaccinations.html
- ⁵ACIP rabies. Titer frequency, clinical guidance and next steps. Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices. October 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/acip/meetings/downloads/slides-2020-10/rabies-07-Rao-508.pdf>
- ⁶Rabies Post-exposure Prophylaxis. *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*. May 2024. https://www.cdc.gov/rabies/hcp/prevention-recommendations/post-exposure-prophylaxis.html?CDC_AAref_Val=https://www.cdc.gov/rabies/medical_care/index.html
- ⁷Rabies pre-exposure vaccination and titers for the veterinary team. *American Veterinary Medical Association*. (n.d.). <https://www.avma.org/resources-tools/one-health/rabies/rabies-pre-exposure-vaccination-and-titers-veterinarians>
- ⁸AVMA VetSTEPP™ is underwritten by New York Life Insurance Company (NY, NY, 10010) on group policy form GMR. Learn more about coverage features, costs, eligibility, renewability, exclusions, and limitations by visiting <https://avmalife.org/Products/Packages/Student-Essential-Protection>

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