

SUMMARY PROFILE FOR RABIES

1 DESCRIPTION

A virus disease which affects humans and all mammals, including cats, dogs, wildlife, farm animals. The disease is absent from land mammals in the UK but has been detected at a low prevalence in certain species of bats in GB. It is invariably fatal once signs of the disease have appeared. Infection is usually spread by the bite of an infected animal because the virus is present in the saliva. After infection it may take several months for the disease to develop. At first, affected animals show changes in their behaviour. They may appear anxious or irritable, or wild animals may appear unusually friendly and approach people. As the disease progresses they begin to drool saliva, may become excited and aggressive, may attack people or other animals (the classical "mad dog"), and may have convulsions. Finally they become paralysed and die, usually within 15 days of the first signs of illness. Some species of bats may carry certain strains of the virus without developing disease themselves, but they can still spread it to other animals.

2 RATIONALE FOR GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION

2.1 Protection of Human Health

The disease is fatal to humans.

2.2 Society

The disease is of significant economic importance in areas where it is endemic. Treatment of people who are bitten is unpleasant and expensive. Vaccination of animals may be necessary to protect them from the disease. An outbreak in the UK would cause significant public concern.

2.3 Trade

Assurances on rabies status are required for trade in live animals and products.

2.4 Welfare

The disease is distressing for the affected animals. Attacks by rabid carnivores compromise the welfare of other animals.

3 LEGISLATIVE OVERVIEW

Rabies is a notifiable disease. EU and domestic legislation aims to protect human and animal health by preventing the introduction of the disease to UK in live animals or animal products, and provides powers to stamp out any outbreaks.

4 GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION

GB – The disease was eradicated from land mammals in GB in 1922 and Northern Ireland in 1923. Since then there have been a few cases in imported animals. These have been stamped out promptly and the country remains free. However, a strain of the virus is present in bats within GB. A bat conservation worker died from the disease in 2002 following a bite from a bat but there are no known instances of disease spreading from bats to other animals in GB. EU – The disease is absent from Scandinavia and Ireland but present in many parts of continental Europe with the highest incidence in Eastern Europe. A widespread epidemic in red foxes in Western Europe has almost been eradicated by the use of a vaccine in wildlife administered in baits. International – The disease is present in most other countries except Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Hawaii and Antarctica.

5 RISK OF INTRODUCTION / SPREAD

Moderate. The requirements of import legislation and post-import checking are designed to reduce the risk of importing the disease to a very low level. The greatest risk is from the illegal import of animals infected abroad.

6 HUMAN HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

The risk of contracting the disease is extremely low in the UK and Western Europe, but higher in some popular tourist destinations. Once symptoms appear in humans the disease is invariably fatal. Effective treatment after a bite from an infected animal is available but must be started as soon as possible after the bite. A vaccine is available to protect people at particular risk such as those working in quarantine kennels in UK or bat conservation workers. Unvaccinated people should not handle live bats.

7 DISEASE CONTROL STRATEGY

The disease control strategy is to prevent the introduction of the disease by the application of import controls, including the Pet Travel Scheme, quarantine and post import checks. A rabies contingency plan is in place to stamp out the disease if it is introduced. Depending on the circumstances this could involve controls on domestic pets, vaccination, restrictions on animal gatherings, detention of stray animals and vaccination or destruction of wildlife in limited areas.

8 CURRENT SURVEILLANCE

Statutory notification of suspected disease or deaths of animals in quarantine, followed by outbreak investigation. Rabies tests carried out on dead bats submitted by conservation groups or the public. Surveillance studies in bats in certain areas.

9 COSTS

Tests on animals which die in quarantine: £25,000 p.a. Surveillance including dead bats: £134,000 p.a. Targeted serological surveillance in bats: £161,000 in 2003/2004. Other: The cost of controlling an outbreak could be large.

10 STAKEHOLDER IMPACT

Statutory – Owners and vets must notify the DVM if they suspect disease. Pet owners must comply with import regulations. The general public need to be aware of the risks in handling bats, and the risk from dogs in many tourist destinations such as North Africa. Benefits – The general public benefit greatly from keeping the UK free from a serious human and animal disease. If the disease became endemic, treatment of people bitten by rabid animals could make serious demands on NHS resources.

11 COMPENSATION

Compensation is payable for compulsorily slaughtered animals except those in quarantine.

For further information contact vetsurveillance@defra.gsi.gov.uk

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VETERINARY AND EPIDEMIOLOGICAL INFORMATION

Source Data
"Veterinary Medicine" 9 th edition – Radostits, Gay, Blood and Hinchcliff , W B Saunders 1999, ISBN 0-7020-24090
"Zoonoses" - ed Palmer, Soulsby and Simpson, Oxford University Press 1998, ISBN 0-19-262380X
The OIE (Office International Epizooties) website [http://www.oie.int/eng/maladies/en_classification.htm]
The Department of Health website [http://www.dh.gov.uk/Home/fs/en]

LEGISLATIVE AND ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION

Source Data
The Animal Health Act 1981
The Rabies (Importation of Dogs, Cats and Other Mammals) Order 1974, as amended
The Channel Tunnel (International Arrangements) Order 1993
The Rabies (Control) Order 1974
The Rabies (Compensation) Order 1976
The Pet Travel Scheme (Pilot Arrangements) Order 1999
The EUR-Lex database of EU legislation (Animal Health and Zootechnics)
The DEFRA 'VIPER' working instructions for SVS staff

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