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Rabies in Animals

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Rabies is a very dangerous and deadly disease of animals that can also spread to humans. It is caused by a virus that attacks the brain and nerves. Once the disease starts showing signs, there is no cure and the animal or person will die. Rabies has been known since ancient times, but even today it continues to kill many animals and people, especially in rural areas. In India, dogs are the main source of rabies, and most cases in cattle and humans occur after dog bites.

Almost all warm-blooded animals can get rabies. Dogs, cats, cattle, buffaloes, goats, sheep, horses, and wild animals like foxes, jackals, monkeys, and bats can carry the disease. Among these, stray and unvaccinated dogs play the biggest role in spreading rabies. When a rabid animal bites another animal or a person, the virus enters the body through saliva.

Rabies spreads mainly through bites, scratches, or licking of wounds. Even a small bite or scratch can be dangerous if the skin is broken. The disease does not spread by touching healthy skin, feeding animals, or staying near them. Many farmers believe that only mad dogs spread rabies, but even animals that look normal can spread the virus during the early stage.

The symptoms of rabies do not appear immediately. The time between bite and illness may range from two weeks to several months. Bites near the head, face, or neck cause faster disease. During this silent period, the virus slowly travels through nerves toward the brain.

Animals affected with rabies show clear changes in behaviour. Some become aggressive, restless, and bite people, animals, or objects without reason. Excessive salivation, frothing from the mouth, fear of light or water, and abnormal sounds may be seen. In many cases, animals become weak and paralyzed, stop eating, and cannot swallow. Dogs may have a hanging jaw, while cattle may appear as if they are choking or suffering from digestive problems. Death usually occurs within 3–7 days after symptoms appear.

Rabies has no treatment once symptoms start, so prevention is the only protection. Suspected animals should never be handled with bare hands. Farmers should isolate such animals and inform a veterinarian immediately. Dead animals suspected of rabies should not be cut open or touched, as the virus is present in the brain and saliva.

Vaccination of animals is the most effective way to prevent rabies. All pet dogs and cats should be vaccinated regularly starting from three months of age, followed by booster doses as advised by veterinarians. Livestock in rabies-affected areas may also be vaccinated. Mass dog vaccination in villages is extremely important because controlling rabies in dogs protects both animals and humans.

Control of stray dog population is equally important. Animal Birth Control (ABC) programmes, proper waste management, and responsible pet ownership help reduce rabies cases. Farmers should avoid feeding or provoking unknown or aggressive dogs.

Post-Exposure Prevention (PEP) is life-saving and must be started immediately after any bite or scratch. The first and most important step is washing the wound thoroughly with soap and clean running water for at least 15 minutes. This simple action can remove most of the virus. After washing, antiseptics like iodine or alcohol may be applied, but traditional substances such as chilli, turmeric, oil, or lime should never be used.

After first aid, medical and veterinary help must be taken without delay. People bitten by animals should immediately visit a hospital for anti-rabies vaccination and immunoglobulin if advised by doctors. Animals bitten by suspected rabid animals should be taken to a veterinarian for post-bite vaccination and observation. Delaying PEP can be fatal.

Rabies causes serious economic loss to farmers. Death of cattle, buffaloes, and horses affects milk production, farm work, and family income. In addition, rabies creates fear and risk for family members, especially children.

Rabies is a One Health disease; meaning animal health, human health, and environment are connected. By vaccinating dogs, managing stray animals, maintaining cleanliness, and spreading correct information, villages can become rabies-free.

Rabies can be completely prevented with awareness, vaccination, and timely action. Farmers play a key role in protecting their animals and families. Early reporting, correct wound care, and cooperation with veterinarians can save lives and livelihoods.

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