

# Management of patients with suspected rabies exposure

Guidance for health care providers  
working with your local public  
health unit

April 2017

## Public Health Ontario

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## Purpose

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This guidance document is intended to support health care providers in working in conjunction with your local public health unit to appropriately manage persons with suspected rabies exposures. It will aid in the decision of whether to administer rabies post-exposure prophylaxis (rPEP), which consists of the following:

- **In a previously unvaccinated person:** rabies immune globulin on the first day of post-exposure prophylaxis (Day 0) and rabies vaccination on Days 0, 3, 7 and 14. In those who are immunocompromised or taking antimalarial drugs, an additional dose is provided on Day 28.
- **In a person who was previously appropriately vaccinated against rabies:** only two doses of rabies vaccine are required which are given on Days 0 and 3. No rabies immune globulin is required.

The management of suspected rabies exposures involves a number of considerations, including the type of animal involved in the exposure, the details of the exposure incident, and the knowledge of animal rabies in the geographic area where the exposure occurred. Local public health units are required to conduct a risk assessment on all individuals who have had a suspected rabies exposure.<sup>1</sup> While the ultimate decision to administer rPEP rests with the health care provider, the local public health unit's risk assessment provides valuable information to help determine appropriate management of suspected rabies exposures.

The guidance provided in this document is based on the advice in the [rabies chapter of the Canadian Immunization Guide](#)<sup>2</sup> and the [Guidance Document for the Management of Suspected Rabies Exposures](#)<sup>3</sup>.

**As with any guidance document, professional judgment remains essential and may result in decisions that differ from these general guidelines.**

## Immediate management

The initial management of any acute wound from an animal involves thoroughly cleaning the wound. The [Canadian Immunization Guide](#) advises the following:

*“Immediate and thorough cleaning and flushing of the wound with soap and water is imperative and is probably the most effective procedure in the prevention of rabies. Care should be taken to clean the wound to its full depth. Flushing for approximately 15 minutes is suggested. Some guidelines also suggest the application of a viricidal agent, such as iodine-containing or alcohol solutions. Suturing the wound should be avoided if possible, and tetanus prophylaxis and antibiotics should be given as appropriate.”<sup>2</sup>*

## Reporting to your Medical Officer of Health/public health unit

Under Ontario [Regulation 557 of the Health Protection and Promotion Act](#)<sup>4</sup>, health care providers are required to notify their [Medical Officer of Health/local public health unit](#) of any person who has a suspected rabies exposure. This notification should occur as soon as possible and should provide the local public health unit with any available information.

## Gathering information to assess risk and determine management of suspected rabies exposures

Upon notification of a suspected human exposure to rabies, local public health units are required to conduct a risk assessment to determine the need for rabies post-exposure prophylaxis (rPEP). To support the risk assessment, the local public health unit's roles include:

- tracking the prevalence of rabies in your community;
- arranging for observation of the animal, if appropriate and the animal is available;
- assisting in locating the animal if it is not initially available;
- arranging for rabies testing of the animal, if appropriate and necessary;
- providing the medications for rPEP, if deemed necessary.

When working with your local public health unit, you and/or your patient will be asked to provide available information including:

- demographic and other relevant information about the exposed person;
- information about the animal, its location, its vaccination status, and its owner;
- details of the exposure incident.

Only mammals can carry rabies. Some specific questions and considerations for suspected rabies exposures from various types of animals that can carry rabies can be found in the sections below:

- [Dogs, cats and ferrets](#) - page 4
- [Bats](#) – page 7
- [Wild mammals](#) (e.g., raccoons, foxes, skunks, coyotes, not including rodents and lagomorphs) – page 10
- [Wild and domestic rodents](#) (e.g., squirrels, chipmunks, rats, mice, hamsters, guinea pigs, gerbils, ground hogs (woodchucks), and beavers) [and lagomorphs](#) (e.g., rabbits and hares) – page 11
- [Livestock](#) (e.g., horses, cattle, sheep, goats) – page 11
- [Other mammals](#) (e.g., non-human primates, exotic species) – page 12

Although your local public health unit conducts the risk assessment concerning suspected rabies exposure, the ultimate decision regarding administering rPEP rests with the health care provider.

## Resources for guidance on rabies post-exposure prophylaxis (rPEP) administration

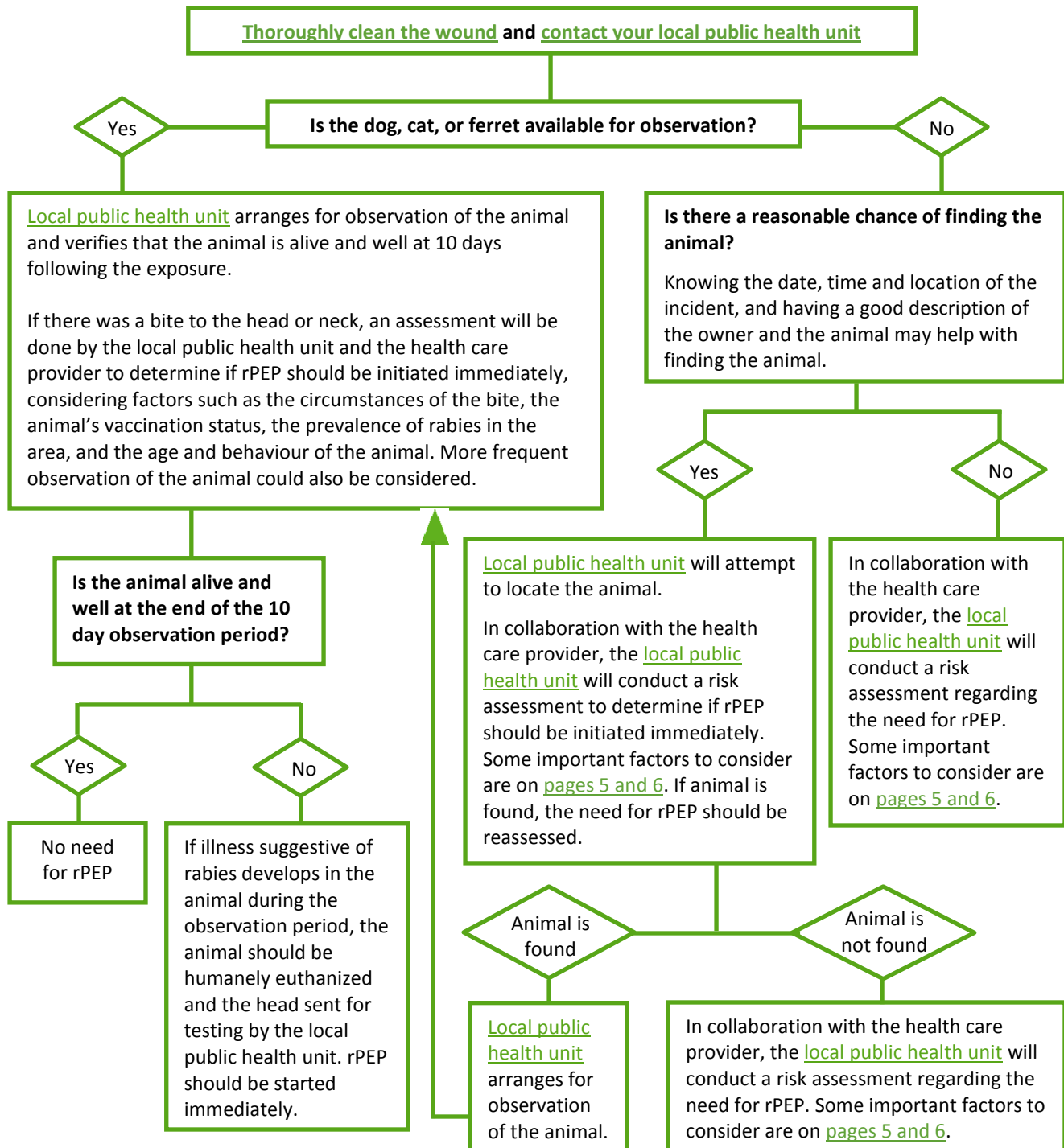
Once the decision is made that rPEP is warranted in a particular situation, please see the following documents for guidance on administering the rabies vaccine and immune globulin, as indicated:

- Any information on the administration of rPEP provided by your local public health unit or included with the rabies immune globulin and vaccine.
- Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care. Guidance Document for the Management of Suspected Rabies Exposures. [http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/publichealth/oph\\_standards/docs/guidance/gd\\_mng\\_suspected\\_rabies\\_exposures.pdf](http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/publichealth/oph_standards/docs/guidance/gd_mng_suspected_rabies_exposures.pdf)
- National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI). Canadian Immunization Guide. Part 4: Active vaccines: rabies vaccine. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/healthy-living/canadian-immunization-guide-part-4-active-vaccines/page-18-rabies-vaccine.html>
- National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI). Canadian Immunization Guide. Part 5: Passive immunizing agents: rabies immune globulin. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/healthy-living/canadian-immunization-guide-part-5-passive-immunization.html#p5a4e>

## Dogs, cats or ferrets – Management of suspected rabies exposures

Figure 1 provides information to consider when working with your local public health unit in determining the appropriate management, including the need for rabies post-exposure prophylaxis (rPEP), when a person presents with a bite or scratch from a dog, cat or ferret, or gets saliva from these animals into a break in the skin or onto a mucous membrane (i.e., eyes, nose, mouth).

**Figure 1:** Dogs, cats or ferrets post-exposure management algorithm





# Dogs, cats or ferrets – Important factors to consider regarding the need for rabies post-exposure prophylaxis (rPEP) when the animal is not available for observation

Figure 2 provides some of the important factors that form part of the local public health unit’s risk assessment of a suspected rabies exposure from a dog, cat or ferret that is not available for observation. Considering the following will help determine the risk of rabies and whether rPEP (i.e., rabies vaccine and rabies immune globulin, as indicated) is needed.

**Figure 2:** Important factors to consider regarding the need for rPEP when the dog, cat or ferret is not available for observation.

Important factors to consider	Background information	Impact on assessment <sup>1</sup>
<p><b>Prevalence of rabies in the area</b></p> <p>When was the last case of rabies in the area (excluding bats)?</p> <p>How much recent rabies has been identified in animals in the area?</p> <p>What types of animals were recently found to have rabies?</p> <p>What is the risk of importation of rabid animals?</p> <p>How much rabies surveillance occurs in the area?</p>	<p>The <a href="#">local public health unit</a> tracks the numbers and types of rabid animals in the area; however, the amount of surveillance of animals varies across Ontario, and may be limited in some areas. Data on rabid animals in Ontario are based on information from:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA)</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA)</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources</a></li> </ul> <p>Domestic animals (e.g., dogs, cats, farm animals) in Ontario with rabies are usually infected by wild animals unless the domestic animal has been imported from other areas.</p>	<p>The risk of rabies increases if there have been cases of rabies in the area (e.g., in the health unit area or in neighbouring health units) in non-bat species in the past few years.</p> <p>However, it should be noted that there is an ongoing potential risk of rabies importation into the area that may be unrecognized, especially if surveillance in the area is limited.</p>

*Continued on next page*

Important factors to consider	Background information	Impact on assessment <sup>1</sup>
<p><b>Did the animal appear to have an owner or could it be a stray?</b></p>	<p>Stray animals are more likely to have rabies as they are outdoors with more possibility to encounter rabid wildlife, may not be brought into care if they become ill and are not likely vaccinated.</p>	<p>Stray animals may be more likely to be infected with rabies.</p>
<p><b>What is the type of the exposure and location on the body?</b></p> <p>Was it a bite, scratch, or exposure to saliva in a break in the skin or onto a mucous membrane?</p> <p>Was the skin broken?</p> <p>Where on the body was the exposure?</p>	<p>For transmission to occur, saliva containing the rabies virus must enter a break in the skin or mucous membrane.</p> <p>Most human rabies results from bites. Human rabies from a scratch is extremely rare.</p> <p>The incubation period for bites on the head and neck may be quite short because of the proximity to the brain.</p>	<p>Although any exposure that results in saliva from a rabid animal coming into contact with a break in the skin or a mucous membrane can result in human rabies, the risk of rabies increases if the exposure was a bite wound.</p> <p>Because of a shorter incubation period for head and neck exposures, immediate rPEP may be indicated, as determined in conjunction with the other factors in the risk assessment.</p>
<p><b>Was the bite provoked or unprovoked?</b></p> <p>Did the exposed person approach the animal or did the animal approach the person?</p>	<p>Dogs/cats that are being fed, handled, or approached may bite or scratch; these would be considered provoked incidents.</p>	<p>If exposure occurred when the animal was provoked (e.g., the animal was being fed, handled, or approached), the provocation may have incited the exposure.</p> <p>If the animal approached the person without any provocation, this is potentially more concerning with respect to the risk of rabies in the animal.</p>
<p><b>Is the patient able to provide a reliable history?</b></p>		<p>Concerns about the reliability of the story from the patient may influence decisions regarding post-exposure prophylaxis.</p>

## Bats – Management of suspected rabies exposures

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Rabies in bats is common although the exact prevalence is not known. The prevalence of rabies in captured bats sent for testing may overestimate the prevalence in wild bats. In 2015, 3.6% of all the bats submitted for rabies testing in Ontario were found to have rabies.<sup>5</sup>

**Any direct contact with a bat requires appropriate management (i.e., testing the bat and/or administering rabies post-exposure prophylaxis - rPEP).** The following will assist in determining if bat contact occurred or there is evidence of direct contact after potential exposures to bats.

### Assessment of direct contact

**Direct contact** is defined as the bat touching the skin of the person or bat salivary exposure into a break in the skin or onto a mucous membrane (e.g., eyes, nose, mouth). Direct contact is ruled out if the bat did not touch the skin of the person, and if bat saliva did not enter into a break in the skin or onto a mucous membrane.

- **Contact through clothing** requires an assessment of whether direct contact with the skin may have occurred through the clothing:
  - When the person can give a reliable history and is certain that the bat did not touch the skin and bat saliva did not enter into a break in the skin or onto a mucous membrane, direct contact is ruled out.
  - If a child or person who cannot give a reliable history has had a bat landing on clothing, direct contact should be considered to have occurred.
- **Contact with a dead bat** is considered direct contact unless the dead bat was dried up at the time of contact, as the virus is easily killed by sunlight and drying.

### Bat in the bedroom

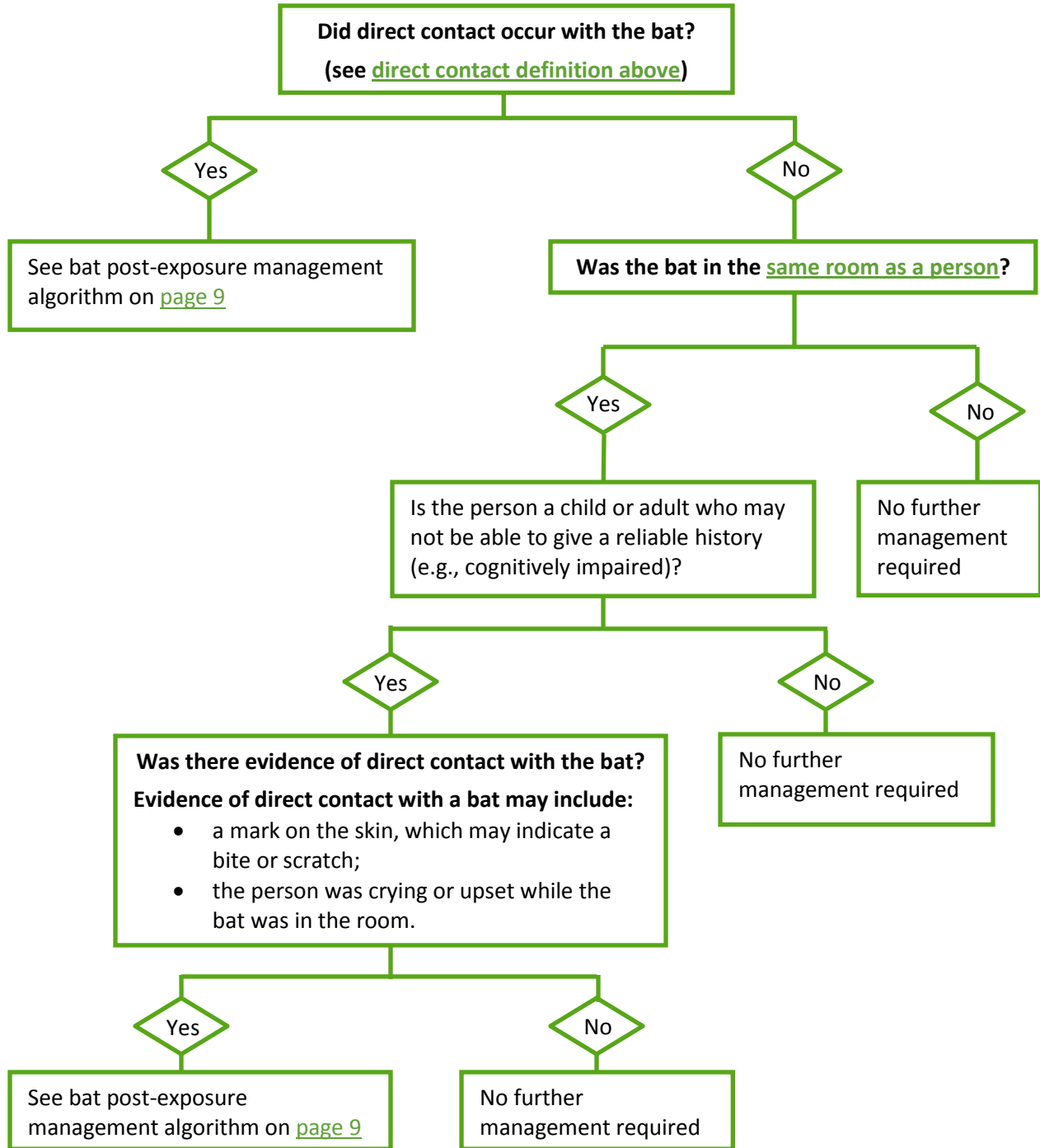
Prior to August 2008, there was a recommendation to offer rPEP to anyone who woke to find a bat in their room. This recommendation was changed because evidence indicated that when there is no recognized direct contact with a bat, the risk of rabies is extremely low.

Finding a bat in the room – even if the person was asleep – is therefore generally **NOT** a reason for prophylaxis **UNLESS** direct contact is known to have occurred or there is evidence of direct contact with the bat. If the bat was found in the room with a child or adult who is unable to give a reliable history, assessment of direct contact can be difficult.

#### **Evidence of direct contact with a bat may include:**

- a mark on the skin, which may indicate a bite or scratch;
- the person was crying or upset while the bat was in the room.

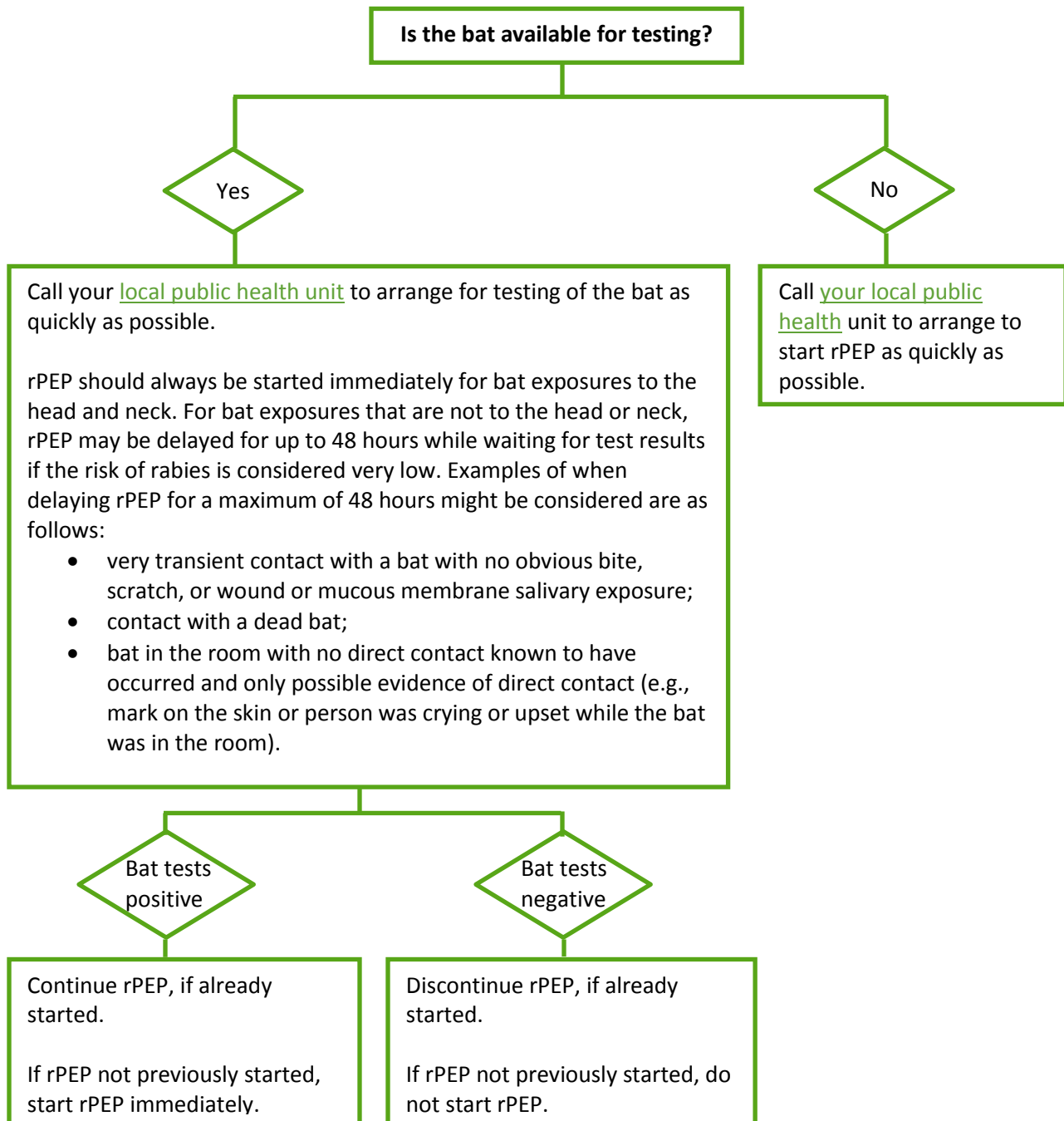
**Figure 3:** Assessment of exposure to bats



## Bat post-exposure management algorithm

If direct contact has occurred or there is evidence of direct contact with a bat, Figure 3 will assist in determining the use of rabies post-exposure prophylaxis (rPEP).

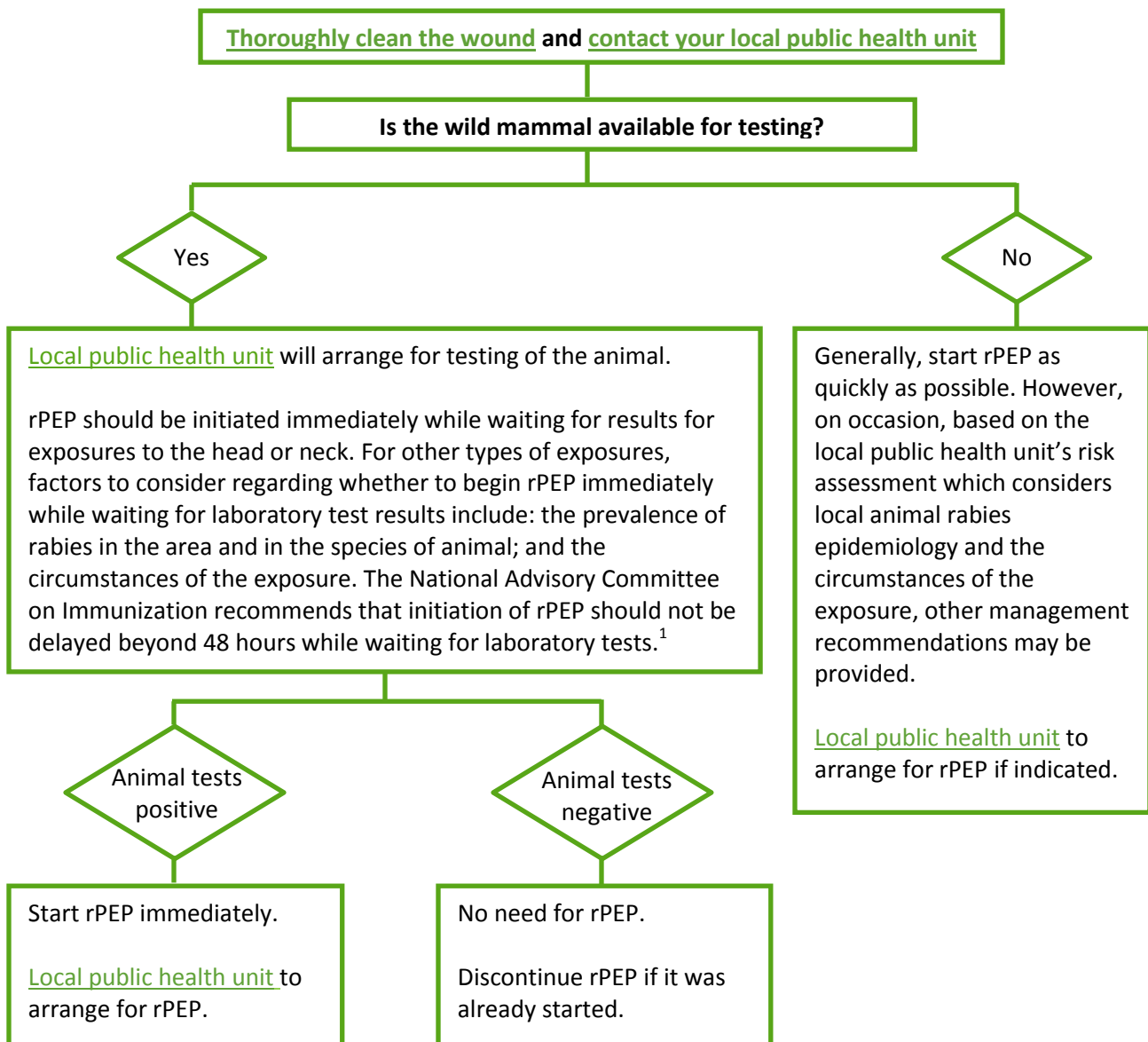
**Figure 4:** Bat post-exposure management algorithm



## Wild mammals (e.g., raccoons, foxes, skunks, coyotes) not including rodents – Management of suspected rabies exposures

Figure 5 provides information to consider when working with your local public health unit in determining management when a person presents with a bite or scratch from a wild mammal (e.g., raccoon, fox, skunk, coyote), or gets saliva from these mammals into a break in the skin or onto a mucous membrane (i.e., eyes, nose, mouth). Considering the following will help determine the risk of rabies and whether rabies post-exposure prophylaxis (rPEP) is needed.

**Figure 5:** Wild mammal post-exposure management algorithm



## **Wild and domestic rodents (e.g., squirrels, chipmunks, rats, mice, hamsters, guinea pigs, gerbils, ground hogs (woodchucks), and beavers) and lagomorphs (e.g., rabbits and hares) – Management of suspected rabies exposures**

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The following provides information to consider when working with your local public health unit in determining management when a person presents with a bite or scratch from a wild or domestic rodent, or gets saliva from these animals into a break in the skin or onto a mucous membrane (e.g., eyes, nose, mouth). This includes squirrels, chipmunks, rats, mice, hamsters, guinea pigs, gerbils, ground hogs (woodchucks), beavers and lagomorphs (e.g., rabbits and hares).

### **Small rodents and lagomorphs:**

Rabies is very rare in small rodents such as squirrels, chipmunks, rats, mice, hamsters, guinea pigs, gerbils, and lagomorphs (e.g. rabbits and hares), as these animals would generally be killed during the encounter with the other animal that is rabid. These small animals can, theoretically, become infected by bat strains of rabies; however, there have been no documented confirmed cases of transmission of bat strains of rabies from these animals to humans in North America.

For squirrels, chipmunks, rats, mice, hamsters, guinea pigs, gerbils, rabbits and hares, rabies post-exposure prophylaxis (rPEP) would generally only be considered if the animal's behaviour is highly unusual (e.g., if one of these animals attacked a person without provocation). A bite from these animals while feeding, touching or otherwise interacting with them would not be considered unusual behaviour.

### **Larger rodents:**

In Canada, rabies is rare in larger rodents, such as groundhogs (woodchucks) and beavers. Exposure to these animals requires a risk assessment by the health unit in collaboration with the health care provider to determine the need for rabies post-exposure prophylaxis (rPEP). The risk assessment includes the frequency of rabies in these and other animals in the geographic area; the type of exposure; and the circumstances of the exposure, including whether it was provoked or unprovoked.

## Livestock (e.g., horses, cattle, sheep, goats) – Management of suspected rabies exposures

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Human exposures to livestock are usually related to saliva coming into contact with a break in the skin, with the exception of horses and swine, from which bites have been reported. Exposure to livestock (e.g. horse, cattle, sheep, goats) requires a risk assessment by the [local public health unit](#) in collaboration with the health care provider to determine the need for rabies post-exposure prophylaxis (rPEP). The risk assessment includes the frequency of rabies in these and other animals in the geographic area; the type of exposure; and the circumstances of the exposure, including whether it was provoked or unprovoked. If considered appropriate, an observation period can be determined on a case-by-case basis in consultation with your local public health unit.

## Other mammals such as non-human primates, exotic species, etc., including exposures to these animals in other countries – Management of suspect rabies exposures

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For other mammals such as non-human primates and exotic species, including exposures to these animals in other countries, your [local public health unit](#) should be consulted regarding management of suspected rabies exposures from these types of mammals.



## References

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1. Ontario. Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, . Rabies prevention and control protocol, 2013. Toronto, ON; Queen's Printer of Ontario; 2013. Available from: [http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/publichealth/oph\\_standards/docs/rabies\\_prevention.pdf](http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/publichealth/oph_standards/docs/rabies_prevention.pdf)
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