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Malaysian Society of Infection Control and Infectious Diseases

Public Health Advisory

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Understanding Rabies in Malaysia and How to Protect Yourself



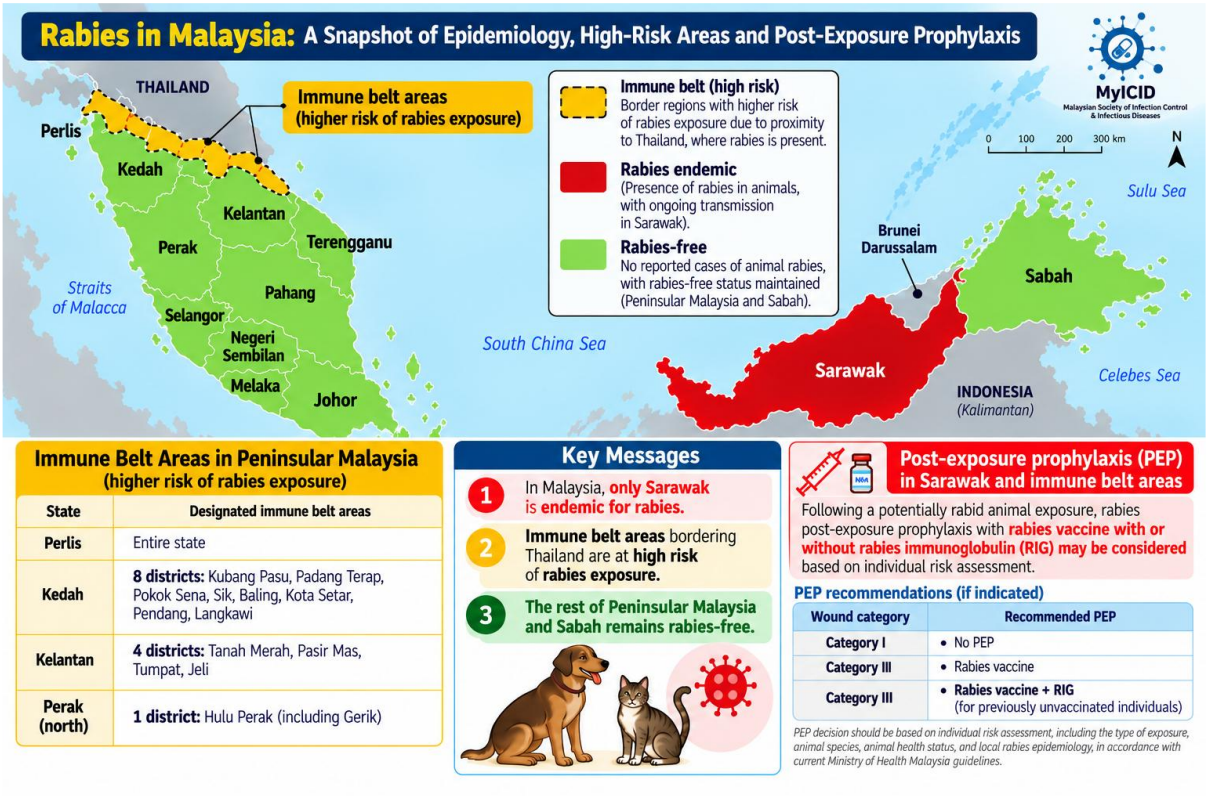
Following the confirmation of a human rabies death in Kedah on 27 September 2026, the first human case in the state since 1998, public concern is understandable. While vigilance is important, our response must be guided by **scientific evidence** rather than fear.

Rabies is a severe and almost universally fatal viral infection, yet it is **completely preventable**. The virus is spread through the bites, scratches or saliva of infected animals, most commonly dogs and cats. Once symptoms appear, the disease is almost 100% fatal. Prompt wound washing, early medical assessment and, where needed, **Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP)** can stop the virus before it reaches the brain.

Key facts

- Rabies is almost 100% fatal once symptoms appear, but it can be prevented.
- **Wash every bite or scratch with soap and running water for at least 15 minutes.**
- **See a doctor the same day**, even if the wound looks minor or has healed. Do not wait for symptoms.
- Your doctor will **assess your risk of rabies exposure** and decide whether you need a rabies vaccine, with or without rabies immunoglobulin (RIG).
- Complete every scheduled vaccine dose planned by doctor.

The Current Rabies Situation in Malaysia

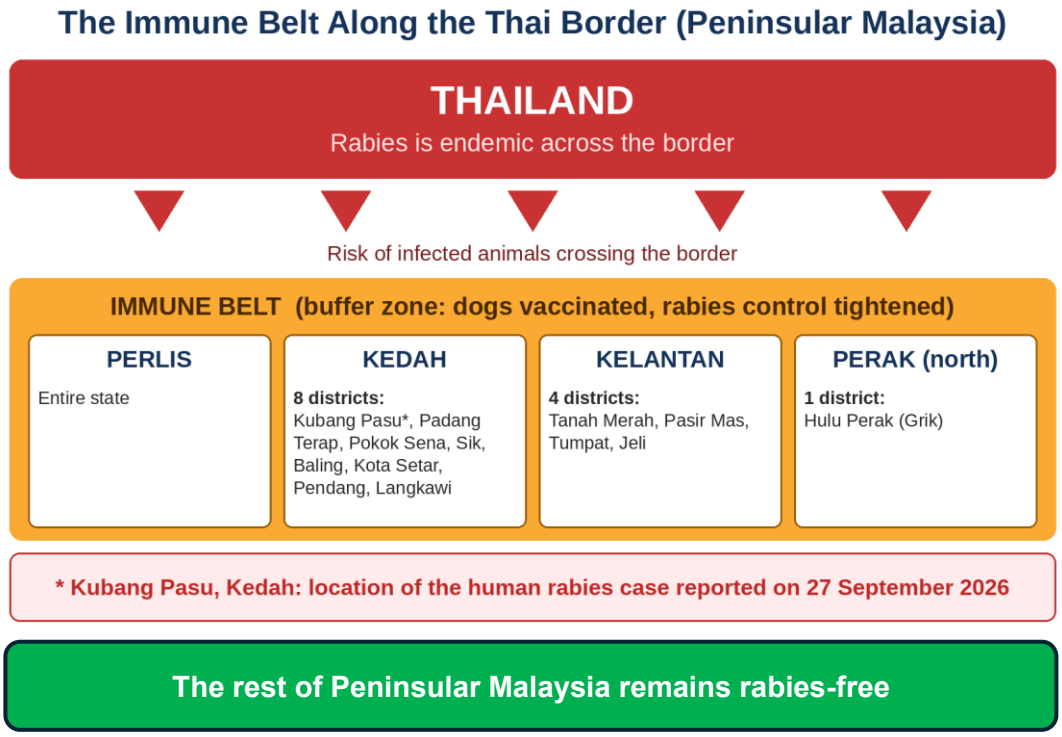


(The map is a schematic public-education graphic. Immune-belt boundaries and surveillance status should be checked against the latest MOH and DVS notices. The map does not replace a clinical risk assessment.)

The immune belt along the Thai border

Rabies is endemic in Thailand, which borders northern Peninsular Malaysia. To stop the virus crossing into the country, the Ministry of Health Malaysia (MOH) and the Department of Veterinary Services (DVS) maintain an **immune belt**. This is a buffer zone along the border where dogs and other animals are vaccinated and rabies control is tightened. According to the MOH list (updated December 2019), the immune belt covers:

- **Perlis:** the entire state
- **Kedah:** 8 districts: Kubang Pasu, Padang Terap, Pokok Sena, Sik, Baling, Kota Setar, Pendang and Langkawi
- **Kelantan:** 4 districts: Tanah Merah, Pasir Mas, Tumpat and Jeli
- **Perak:** Hulu Perak (Grik) in the north



Schematic only, not to scale. Source: Ministry of Health Malaysia immune belt list (updated December 2019).

Note: Sporadic animal rabies cases have also been reported outside the immune belt. Between 2017 and 2019, cases in Taiping and Larut Matang Selama, Perak, were linked to infected dogs brought into the country on **foreign fishing vessels**. No human rabies cases were reported in Perak during this period.

Kedah: A human case inside the immune belt

On 27 September 2026, Jabatan Kesihatan Negeri (JKN) Kedah, the Kedah State Health Department, reported a human rabies death. A 31-year-old man from **Kubang Pasu, a district within the immune belt**, died after being bitten by a stray dog in August 2026.

Up to August 2026, 502 animal bite and scratch cases were reported in Kedah. 65.3% involved dogs, 23.1% cats and 11.6% other animals. 43.8% involved stray animals. MOH, JKN Kedah and DVS are investigating the source of infection and strengthening control measures. **This case shows that animal bites in immune belt areas must never be ignored.**

Sarawak: Rabies-endemic

Rabies re-emerged in Sarawak in July 2017, starting in Serian, and was declared a Level II Disaster in 2019. The virus remains endemic in the state.

- From July 2017 to 31 March 2026, Sarawak recorded **93 human cases, with only 7 survivors**.
- The state receives over 22,000 animal bite notifications a year, about 400 every week.
- About **62.5% now involve cats**, and cat bites now outnumber dog bites. **Cats must not be treated as low risk.**

How Rabies Spreads and Which Animals Are Involved

The rabies virus is found in the saliva and nervous tissue of infected animals. It spreads when:

- An infected animal **bites or scratches** and the skin is broken.
- Infected saliva gets into the **eyes, nose, mouth or an open wound**.

The virus cannot pass through intact skin. Blood contact and casual contact are not routes of spread.

Dogs are the most common source, followed by **cats**. Other mammals can also carry rabies, including monkeys, foxes, raccoons and bats. Stray and unvaccinated animals carry the highest risk, but a pet that looks healthy can still pass on the virus if it is infected.

Warning Signs of Rabies

In animals

- Sudden change in behaviour: unusual aggression, or unusual tameness, shyness or hiding
- Drooling or difficulty swallowing
- Loss of appetite, biting at cages or objects
- Staggering or paralysis
- Sudden death. Rabid animals typically die within about 7 days.





In people

The time between a bite and the first symptoms varies from days to over a year. Early signs are **fever, tiredness, headache, and pain, tingling or numbness near the bite**. Later signs are confusion, agitation, **fear of water (hydrophobia)** and **fear of air drafts (aerophobia)**. At this stage the disease is almost always fatal, so **do not wait for symptoms. Seek care straight after exposure.**

The Right Rabies Preventive Steps: What You Should Do

The most powerful protection is to act at once after any exposure. Here are the most effective actions you can take.

1. Wash the Wound Immediately

Good wound care alone can sharply reduce the amount of virus in the wound. Wash all bite wounds, scratches or exposed skin under clean running tap water with soap for **at least 15 minutes**. Then apply an antiseptic such as povidone-iodine, and seek medical assessment right away. Do not scrub hard, suck the wound, or apply herbal or traditional remedies.

- For **deep puncture wounds**, healthcare staff will flush and irrigate the wound to wash out trapped saliva.
- If saliva got into your eyes, nose or mouth, rinse thoroughly with clean water and seek care.
- For **children**, an adult or health worker should supervise the washing so it is done properly.



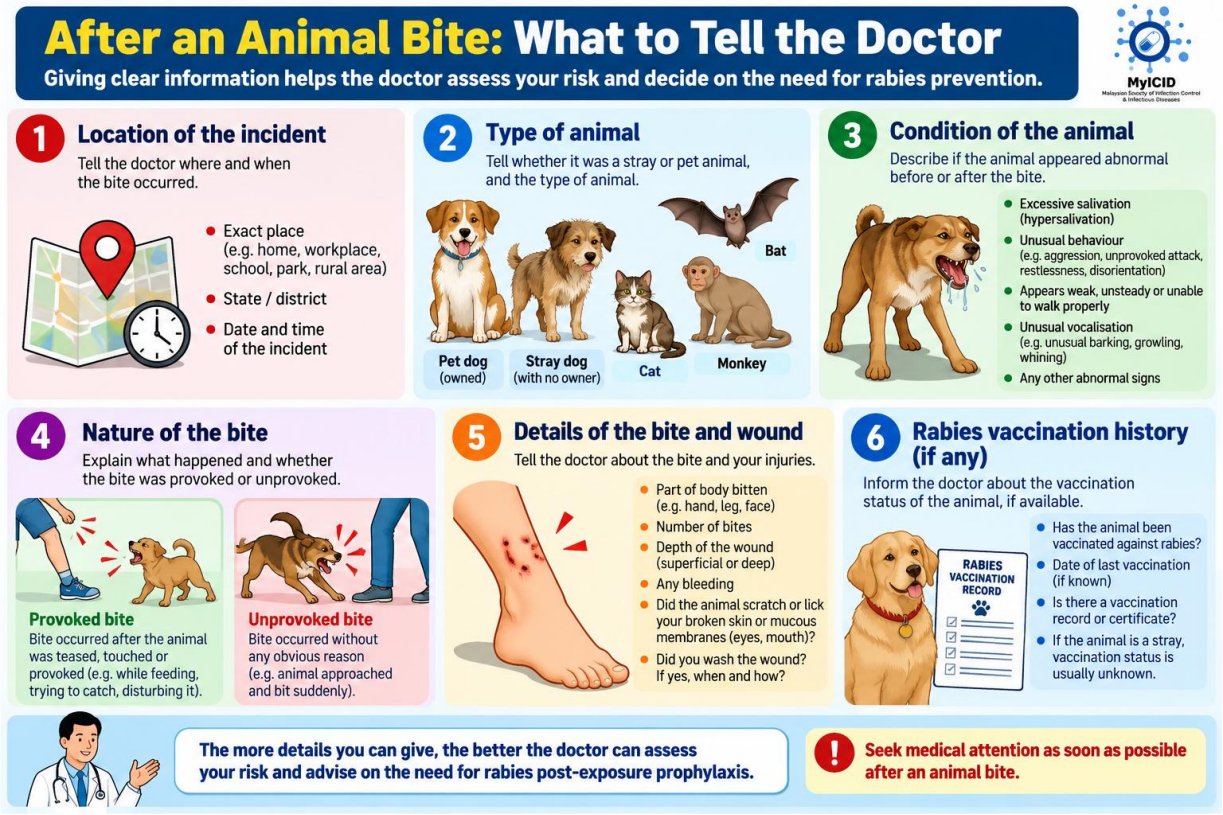
2. See a Doctor the Same Day

Go to a government or private clinic or hospital after **any** of the following, even if the wound seems minor or has healed:

- A bite or scratch that breaks the skin or draws blood
- Licking on broken skin, or on the eyes, nose or mouth
- Nibbling on uncovered skin
- Any contact with a stray, wild or unknown animal, or a bat
- Contact with a sick or dead animal

2. What to Tell the Doctor

Describe the exact place and time of the incident; the animal species and whether it was a pet or stray; unusual behaviour such as drooling, aggression or staggering; whether the bite was provoked or unprovoked; the wound site, number and depth of injuries; and the animal's rabies vaccination history, if known.



Sarawak and Immune Belt Areas

If you are bitten or scratched by an animal in an immune belt area or in Sarawak, go to a clinic or hospital **immediately.** You may need to be given **rabies vaccines with or without immunoglobulin,** especially if the animal:

- Behaves abnormally (aggressive, drooling, staggering, unusually quiet or fearful)
- Is a stray or unknown animal
- Is unvaccinated or its vaccination status is unknown
- Falls ill, dies or disappears after the bite

Go urgently for bites to the head, neck, face or hands, multiple or deep bites, or if you have a weakened immune system. **Do not wait to see what happens to the animal.**

The Rest of Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah

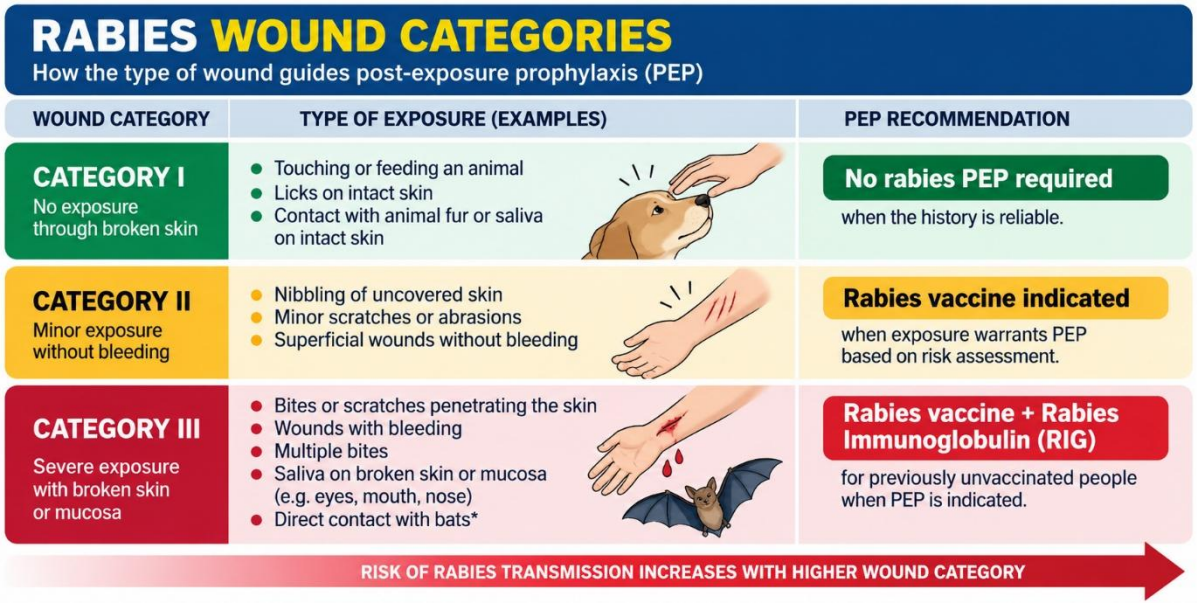
Even outside high-risk areas, anyone bitten or scratched by an animal should seek medical attention promptly for wound assessment and care. The doctor will assess the risk of rabies exposure and determine whether rabies vaccination is necessary.

3. Understand Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP)

PEP is the complete medical treatment given immediately after exposure to **an animal that may have rabies.** The risk of rabies transmission generally increases with higher wound categories, reflecting more severe exposure. Because rabies travels along the nerves to the brain, PEP is a **race against time** to stop the virus before it reaches the central nervous system.

The doctor decides PEP based on the **risk from the animal**, **where the incident happened**, and the site and **severity of the wound.** After assessing you, the doctor may give a **rabies vaccine, with or without rabies immunoglobulin (RIG)**. RIG is an injection of ready-made antibodies placed in and around the wound, and is available only at selected hospitals.

- Antibiotics and tetanus protection may also be given.
- Rabies treatment is safe in pregnancy and breastfeeding.
- Tell your doctor if you have had a rabies vaccine before, or if you have a weakened immune system.



4. Complete Every Rabies Vaccine Dose

Rabies vaccine works by helping your body make antibodies before the virus reaches the brain. The first dose is only the beginning. PEP is given over a set schedule and your doctor will tell you the exact dates.

- **Never skip or delay doses.** An incomplete course may leave you without full protection.
- Carry your **rabies vaccination card** to every visit so your care is tracked accurately.
- If you cannot return on the scheduled date, contact your doctor early.

5. Monitor the Animal

Do not wait for the animal's outcome before seeking treatment. If the biting animal is an identifiable pet:

- Keep it confined and observe it for **14 days** where possible (international guidance commonly uses 10 days).
- Watch for sickness, sudden aggression, excessive drooling, difficulty swallowing or sudden death.
- Do not kill or release the animal. Notify the Department of Veterinary Services (DVS) immediately if it becomes ill, dies or goes missing, and inform your doctor.
- If the animal is a stray, cannot be found or is already dead, treat the exposure as high risk.

6. Monitor the Wound for Infection

Animal bites can also cause bacterial infection. Watch for **redness, increasing pain, swelling, warmth, pus or a foul smell**. If you are given antibiotics, complete the full course. Return to a healthcare facility at once if signs of infection worsen or do not improve within 24 to 48 hours.

7. Be a Responsible Pet Owner

Vaccinating pets is the main barrier between the virus and people.

- Vaccinate dogs and cats against rabies **every year**, as advised by DVS.
- Keep pets within your compound, or on a leash when outside.
- If a pet becomes unwell, behaves abnormally or may have been exposed to a rabid animal, seek veterinary help immediately.
- Do not feed, touch or adopt stray animals, and teach children not to approach unfamiliar animals.

8. Report Suspected Rabid Animals

Report sick, aggressive or suspected rabid animals to DVS or the local authority (Pihak Berkuasa Tempatan, PBT). Do not handle carcasses of animals that died from an unknown cause.

Key Take-Home Message

If you are bitten or scratched in an immune belt area or Sarawak, seek medical care immediately. Do not wait to observe the animal. This is especially urgent if the animal is stray, unvaccinated, behaving abnormally, or becomes ill, dies, or disappears. Prompt evaluation is also essential for deep or multiple bites, wounds to the head, neck, face, or hands, and for people with weakened immune systems. Rabies is fatal once symptoms appear but entirely preventable: wash the wound with soap and running water for at least 15 minutes, see a doctor the same day, and complete every scheduled vaccine dose to protect yourself and your community.

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For more information, please visit the MyICID website at www.myicid.my

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