

## Patient Information Leaflet

### Rabies Post-Exposure Treatment (Ireland)

#### Why you are receiving this treatment

You are receiving rabies post-exposure treatment (PET) because you may have been exposed to rabies virus. This rabies-prone exposure (RPE) can happen through:

- Bites or scratches from an animal that may carry rabies (such as bats, dogs, cats, or wild animals)
- Contact of saliva from a potentially rabid animal with a person's broken skin or through contact with mucous membranes (in the eyes, mouth, etc.)

Rabies is a very serious viral infection that is almost always fatal once symptoms develop, but it is **completely and entirely preventable with prompt and appropriate treatment**.

The doctor who is assessing you has decided that you have had an RPE and if the type of RPE you have had is mild, moderate or serious (called Category 1, Category 2 and Category 3 RPEs).

You will need to inform the assessing doctor if:

- You are pregnant or breastfeeding (*even if you are pregnant, following an RPE vaccination is **always recommended***)
- You have a weakened immune system (*you may need a modified PET course*).
- You are taking medicines like steroids, chemotherapy, or immunosuppressants (*you may need a modified PET course*).

#### What does PET involve?

It is important to receive rabies PET as soon after the RPE as possible. When you are seen and assessed by the doctor and your course of PET is started, the day it is started is called Day 0. Rabies PET involves two components (most people will require only vaccine):

##### 1. Rabies Vaccine

- Everyone who has been assessed as having had a RPE will need to be given rabies vaccine

- You will be given a series of injections over a period of between two weeks and a month, usually into the upper arm.
- The standard schedule (for people who have never received rabies vaccine before) is four doses given on Days 0, 3, 7, and between days 14 and 28.
- If you have a condition that has weakened your immune system, a fifth dose may be given on Day 28.
- If you have been fully immunised against rabies in the past, and you have another RPE, you may only need a short two-dose course of PET.
- If you have been partially immunised against rabies in the past, and you have another RPE, you will need to be given the appropriate full dose course of PET.
- The vaccine stimulates your body to produce protection (antibodies) against the rabies virus.

## *2. Human Rabies Immunoglobulin (HRIG)*

- If you have had a more serious RPE, you may also be given HRIG on day 0 (the same day as your first vaccine dose).
- HRIG provides immediate short-term protection by supplying ready-made antibodies against rabies while your body develops its own.
- If you have a wound (following a bite) HRIG may be given around the wound site. Any remaining HRIG will be injected into a muscle (usually buttock or thigh). If there is no wound, HRIG is only given in muscle.
- HRIG is only given once.

Everyone gets the same dose of rabies vaccine, but the dose (and amount) of HRIG depends on your weight – larger people require a larger amount of HRIG.

People who have weakened immune systems may require a blood test to check their antibody levels following their course of PET.

## **What to expect**

### *After the Vaccine and HRIG:*

- Mild side effects are common with both and may include:
  - Pain, redness, or swelling at the injection site
  - Fever, headache, tiredness
  - Nausea or muscle aches

These usually settle within a few days.

*After HRIG injection:*

- You may feel temporary discomfort at the injection site(s).
- You may feel muscle pain or swelling at the HRIG injection site, particularly if the dose was large.

**What should you do if you have side effects?**

*Common local side effects:* Redness, pain and swelling at the injection site are possible.

These are to be expected and can usually be managed at home:

- Use paracetamol or ibuprofen for pain or fever
- Apply a cool compress to the injection site if it is sore

*Common generalised side effects:* dizziness, fever, gastrointestinal symptoms, headache, aching muscles, rash.

These are less common and if these symptoms are mild, these can be managed by rest at home. If you are concerned seek medical attention.

*Serious side effects (rare):*

Seek immediate medical attention if you experience:

- Difficulty breathing or swelling of the face/lips/throat (possible allergic reaction)
- Extensive hives or spreading rash
- High fever or confusion.

**Important Advice During Treatment**

- Ensure you return to complete the full course of rabies vaccinations
- Do not have the rabies vaccine in the same limb as HRIG – your healthcare provider will ensure this.
- Avoid strenuous activity for 24 hours after injection if possible.
- If you develop any new or worsening symptoms, contact your GP or attend the Emergency Department.

### **What if I was exposed in another country and PET was started there?**

- The doctor assessing you will decide what course of PET to give you.
- This course may differ from what you were told in the country your exposure happened in. This can happen because Irish guidelines for rabies PET are very stringent, to ensure that treatment is as complete and effective as possible.
- If you have been initially assessed in the country in which your exposure occurred, you should have been provided with documentation relating to the vaccine (and any HRIG) that was given to you. This is to prove that you have been started on effective treatment

Occasionally, if it is not possible to reliably prove that you have been started on effective rabies PET, a decision may be made by your GP/clinic doctor to treat you as if you have never had your initial dose of PET, and to give you a full course of PET. This precautionary approach is taken because of the grave danger of not treating a RPE fully and effectively.

### **Follow-Up and Monitoring**

Keep all follow-up appointments to ensure you complete your course of PET. Make sure you keep your vaccination record from your hospital/clinic/GP carefully – missing a dose can reduce effectiveness.

### **Inform your GP or the clinic if:**

- You are pregnant or breastfeeding (vaccination is still recommended)
- You have a weakened immune system
- You are taking medicines like steroids, chemotherapy, or immunosuppressants

## **FAQs**

### **How serious is rabies?**

Rabies is considered to be extremely lethal and is one of the most serious infections known to man. If rabies is untreated, it is always fatal.

Fortunately, when rabies PET is given soon after an RPE, it is virtually always effective at preventing the development of rabies. That is why it is so important to be checked out if you think you have been exposed to rabies. See [HPSC.ie](https://www.hpsc.ie) for further information to help people to decide if they need to get themselves checked out.

### **Is rabies PET safe during pregnancy?**

Yes – rabies post-exposure treatment is safe and strongly recommended even if you are pregnant or breastfeeding.

### **Can I receive other vaccines during this time?**

Let your healthcare provider know about any other vaccines or treatments planned. Some may be safely given alongside rabies vaccine.

### **In Case of Emergency**

If you experience symptoms suggesting an allergic reaction or serious problems after treatment, call 999 or go to your nearest Emergency Department.

**For non-urgent advice or if you miss a dose**, contact the GP or clinic that is providing your rabies PET.