



# RABIES IN SEALS

## Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Several Cape fur seals (*Arctocephalus pusillus*) have tested positive for rabies in the Western Cape in June 2024. While this is an emerging situation, we wish to share the following answers to frequently asked questions.

Please also consult the frequently asked questions about rabies in general at <https://www.elsenburg.com/western-cape/frequently-asked-questions/faq-rabies-awareness/>

### 1. How was the seal rabies discovered?

In May 2024, a dog with rabies in Cape Town was reported to the state veterinarian. The owner suspected it had been bitten by a seal, so samples were taken from aggressive seals reported in that week and sent for rabies testing. When they tested positive, this triggered the testing of seal samples that had been taken and stored by Sea Search, an independent research organisation, since 2022.

### 2. How long have seals had rabies?

The earliest positive case that has been identified so far is from August 2022 in Cape Town. It is likely that the outbreak started before this.

### 3. How did seals get rabies?

Preliminary virus sequencing results show that the seal rabies viruses are most closely related to rabies viruses from other wildlife species in southern Africa. It therefore seems most likely that the outbreak started by a seal being bitten by another rabid wild animal, such as a jackal, on the coast.

### 4. Where do seals have rabies?

Seals can travel long distances along the coast, so given the geographic spread of rabies cases that we have already seen, it is reasonable to assume that there is a risk of rabies wherever seals occur. In the Western Cape as of end July 2024, seals with rabies have been confirmed along the coast in several locations between Yzerfontein and Plettenberg Bay. However, Cape fur seals breed all along the coast of southern Africa between southern Angola and Algoa Bay (Gqeberha).

### 5. What should I do if I see an aggressive seal?

Do not approach the seal. Keep people and animals away from it as far as possible and contact your local state veterinary office to respond.

### 6. What should I do if I am attacked by a seal?

Get to safety as quickly as possible. If you have a wound or scratch, wash it very thoroughly with soap and water. Then go immediately to your nearest clinic or doctor and tell them that you suspect you have been in contact with a rabid animal. Do not wait; the sooner you receive



treatment, the higher the chance that you will not develop rabies. Also report the aggressive seal to your local state veterinary office.

**7. What should I do if I was bitten by a seal in the past year?**

Consult your doctor or health facility regarding whether you should receive rabies post-exposure prophylaxis.

**8. What should I do if my pet was bitten by a seal in the past year?**

Contact your local state veterinarian for further advice.

**9. How can I protect myself and my community from rabies?**

If you suspect that an animal has rabies, report it immediately to your local state veterinarian so that it can be responded to quickly. Make sure that all of your dogs and cats are vaccinated against rabies and that their vaccinations are kept up to date. This is required by South African law.

Those working with seals on a frequent basis are advised to consult their health care practitioner about receiving pre-exposure rabies vaccinations.

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