My Client Is Traveling to Asia & Africa. What Is the Risk for Rabies Exposure?

Sarah Cleaveland, BSc, VetMB, PhD, MRCVS
University of Glasgow

Despite increasing detection of new Lyssavirus infections in bats and concerns about vampire bat-transmitted rabies in Latin America, most human rabies deaths worldwide result from cases of dog-transmitted rabies in Asia and Africa.

Canine rabies has been well controlled in many parts of the world, including North and South America and western Europe, but it remains endemic throughout Asia (including Eurasia) and Africa. Recent estimates indicate that, each year, approximately 15 million humans are exposed to rabies and 60 000 humans die from rabies as a result of being bitten by infected dogs. ¹

The Real Risk
Potential exposure to rabies is not rare in Asia and Africa. In a study of backpackers traveling to Thailand, 4% of travelers experienced potential exposure from licks or bites of unknown dogs. Few of the travelers previously knew about the risk for transmission, and only 18% had received a pre-exposure vaccination before travel. ²

For travelers to rabies-endemic areas, exposures often result from encounters with puppies. In these circumstances, a minor bite or lick may not seem unusual or alarming; however, these exposures...
PEP = postexposure prophylaxis

Key Messages for Clients

- Consider vaccination before traveling.
- Rabies exposure is possible, especially in underdeveloped or rural areas.
- Be mindful of seemingly innocent or innocuous events that are risks, especially when in contact with puppies.

References