



Guidelines for Packaging and Transport of Animal Rabies Specimens to the Public Health and Environmental Laboratories (PHEL) 2022

Rabies testing of animal specimens is available through the New Jersey Department of Health Public Health and Environmental Laboratories (PHEL)

Specimens that are accepted for testing include domestic and wild animals which are suspected of having rabies and/or have an unknown rabies risk and have come into physical contact with people or animals.

SPECIMENS SHOULD NOT BE SENT TO PHEL WITHOUT FIRST CONSULTING WITH THE LOCAL HEALTH DEPARTMENT (LHD) WHERE THE INCIDENT OCCURRED. A map of LHDs is posted online at www.localhealth.nj.gov, with directories including daytime and after-hours numbers.

Animals infected with the rabies virus may display signs and symptoms including aggression or other changes in behavior, and signs of neurologic impairment such as vocalizing, circling, paralysis, etc. For additional information on Rabies, including the definition of an exposure and what to do in case of an exposure, see here: <https://www.nj.gov/health/cd/topics/rabies.shtml>

I. PREPARATION AND PACKAGING SPECIMENS FOR SUBMISSION

1. Except for bats, **ONLY THE HEAD OR BRAIN OF THE ANIMAL** will be accepted for testing. This applies to all animals regardless of size.
 - a. **Note: Once testing is completed, all specimens are incinerated. Specimen remains cannot be returned to veterinarians or animal owners at this point under any circumstances.**
2. **Livestock heads are not accepted** by the NJDOH. They must be coordinated and submitted to the New Jersey Department of Agriculture Animal Diagnostics Lab <https://nj.gov/agriculture/ahdl/contact/>
3. Spray insecticide on specimens which are heavily infested with ticks and fleas, as these are a hazard for the analyst during sample processing. **DO NOT USE** flea or tick spray containing permethrin.
4. Deer will only be accepted if the antlers have been removed.

5. Live Bats will no longer be accepted starting **JANUARY 1st 2023.**
6. If sending live bats prior to January 1st, 2023, live bats must be packaged in an ESCAPE-PROOF container
 - a. e.g. coffee can with tight fitting lid and holes for air
 - b. nothing larger than a 1-gallon paint can and **no cardboard boxes**)
 - c. Container must be clearly labeled **“CAUTION - LIVE BAT” or “BAT DEAD”**
 - d. UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES SHOULD A BAT, DEAD OR ALIVE, BE WRAPPED IN ANYTHING THAT COULD HINDER ACCESS TO IT (A CLOTH TOWEL, DARK PACKING MATERIAL ARE UNACCEPTABLE).
7. **THE SPECIMEN SHOULD NOT BE FROZEN**, as freezing delays the test process.
 - a. Keep specimen refrigerated (2-8°C) prior to transport
 - b. Frozen specimens can be tested, but freezing increases the probability that the sample will be unsatisfactory for testing.
 - c. If samples are accidentally frozen, keep them frozen until delivery.
8. If the specimen is not being transported immediately, refrigerate it, and then package as directed below before transport.
 - a. Specimens that will be in transit for more than 12 hours should be placed in an insulated container.
 - b. Improper storage/packaging may lead to decomposition of the brain. Once the brain is decomposed, the specimen will be reported as “unsatisfactory.”
9. Package specimens for shipment as follows:
 - a. The specimen should be placed in a watertight primary container, such as a heavy plastic bag that is tightly secured and double-bagged or a non-breakable container (i.e. NOT GLASS) with a tight-fitting lid
 - b. The primary container **MUST PREVENT FLUID LEAKAGE**
 - c. Place the primary container in a larger, waterproof, non-breakable transport container such as a styrofoam cooler, insulated shipping container, or box
 - d. Pack the space between the two containers/bags full of coolant packs
 - i. **DO NOT USE DRY ICE OR ICE IN BAGS.**
 - e. If a cardboard box is the only option for the exterior transport container, ensure the specimen is leak proof and the coolant packs are placed in a separate secured plastic bag.
 - f. The specimen must be in a separate container from the coolant packs.
 - g. If the specimen will be in transit for more than 12 hours, be sure to use an insulated container.
 - h. **TO AVOID DELAYS, ENSURE THAT SPECIMENS ARE PACKAGED PROPERLY.**

Note: Couriers are instructed not to pick up specimens that are leaking or otherwise improperly packaged.

10. If individuals are exposed to fluid, such as leakage from an animal head, or a splash or cut during specimen preparation and packaging, they should **IMMEDIATELY WASH THE EXPOSED AREA THOROUGHLY WITH SOAP AND WATER.**
 - a. The name and telephone number of the exposed individual(s) should be added to the VIR-16 form, along with the type of exposure that occurred.
11. The Rabies Examination Request Form must be completed and placed in an envelope or plastic sleeve accompanying the specimen.
 - a. If a specimen is entered using PHEL's Online Ordering and Reporting Portal, the PDF requisition form which pops up upon saving the online order must be printed and enclosed.
 - b. If a submitter does not have access to order via the Online Ordering and Reporting Portal, a copy of the VIR-16 form may be found here (<http://www.state.nj.us/health/forms/vir-16.dot>)
 - c. The envelope must be securely attached to the outside of the transport container, or placed inside of the transport container
 - i. Do not place paperwork inside the primary container containing the specimen.
 - d. If the envelope is placed inside the transport container, the VIR-16 form should be in a plastic bag that is **SEPARATE FROM ANY COOLANT PACKS**, to prevent it from becoming wet and illegible.
 - e. Specimens received without paperwork will be rejected for testing

II. TRANSPORTATION OF SPECIMENS TO THE LABORATORY

1. It is the duty of the LHD to ensure that specimens are packaged properly and submitted to the laboratory on a timely basis.
 - a. Specimens need to be delivered to the PHEL by **1:00 PM** Thursday to ensure that testing is completed by Friday.
 - b. If possible, animals should not be euthanized until prompt delivery has been arranged, so that rabies observation can continue if transport and testing cannot be performed in a timely manner (if the animal's health improves, testing may not be necessary).
2. Address specimens to:

New Jersey Public Health and Environmental Laboratories (PHEL)
Rabies Laboratory
New Jersey State Police Headquarters
3 Schwarzkopf Drive
Ewing, NJ 08628

 - a. Do not address rabies specimens to specific individuals.
 - b. If Shipping: Use UPS or FedEx only. Rabies samples are viewed as Class B

Biohazard and packaging should abide by Class B rules.

- c. The outside of the package is required to have contact information of submitting authority to assist in situations where the VIR-16 or Sample ID is either not provided or becomes separated from the sample.
3. The loading dock of the PHEL is open from 8:30 AM to 4:00 PM on non-holiday weekdays to receive specimens. Rabies specimens accessioned prior to 1:00 PM on a work day (non-weekend or holiday) should have results reported on the next working day.
 4. Results are faxed or emailed at the completion of testing directly to the Health Officer with jurisdiction over the case.
 - a. Note: The New Jersey Department of Agriculture, Division of Animal Health (609-292-3965) can assist with delivery of livestock rabies specimens.
 5. The following methods of transportation can be utilized:
 - a. Hand delivery – Anybody can deliver a sample to NJPHEL. This is the fastest and most reliable method of delivery to ensure the quickest test result turnover time for **high priority specimens**. If the situation is urgent, the owner of the affected animal or the person bitten or exposed can hand deliver the specimen. Alternatively, a friend or family member can deliver the specimen. Specimens can be delivered on a 24-hour basis (see Section III).
 - b. Private delivery services - There are numerous private delivery services that will transport specimens. Specimens must always be sent for arrival on non-holiday weekdays.
 - a. Note: Express Mail and other delivery services offered through the U.S. Postal Service (USPS), should **NOT** be used because rabies specimens are not classified as “mailable”. Specimens delivered by USPS have decomposed during transit and therefore could not be tested.
 - b. **Use UPS or FedEx next day delivery**
 - c. State Courier - There is a courier system that picks up laboratory specimens from various locations throughout the State and delivers them to the PHEL. LHDs can assist with utilizing these couriers. Because courier pick-up schedules can change without notice, utilizing the state courier system may result in a 3–5 day delivery delay compared to other methods of delivery, couriers should only be used for **surveillance, animal exposure, or very low risk human exposure specimens**. The entity dropping off the specimen at a courier location is responsible to verify that the specimen was subsequently picked up and delivered to the PHEL.
 - d. For questions or concerns regarding rabies testing, please call the PHEL Rabies Hotline number at 609-530-8416 or email rabies.phel@doh.nj.gov

- e. In some circumstances (e.g., high-risk human exposures), LHDs may be able to assign staff to deliver specimens to the rabies laboratory.

III. **DIRECTIONS TO PHEL**

Enter the State Police Headquarters Complex via Trooper Drive off Route 175/River Road. The State Police guard will direct the driver to the PHEL facility. Follow the directions for delivery to an intercom outside the PHEL building and tell the security guard that you are delivering a rabies specimen. The guard will raise the gate and the person delivering shall proceed to the Loading Dock/Specimen Receiving area in the rear of the building, where the security guard will facilitate specimen submission.

Prepared by: The New Jersey Public Health and Environmental Laboratories