



Public Health Information Sheet

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303-969-2922

Desert Southwest

505-988-6040

Pacific West/Pacific

Islands/Alaska

510-817-1375

206-220-4270

Web Resources

NPS Public Health:

http://www.nps.gov/public_health/

CDC:

<http://www.cdc.gov>

State and Local Health Departments:

<http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/international/relres.html>

Bats

Although rabies is a rare disease in humans, 35 cases in the U.S. since 1980, it is almost always fatal unless the victim receives prompt medical attention. We think of dogs and wild animals including raccoons, skunks and foxes as being the primary carriers of this disease. What you probably don't know is over half of the human cases since 1980, 20/35, were associated with bats. This statistic was determined after testing the blood of human rabies victims. Twenty of the thirty-five human cases were infected with a rabies virus strain associated with bats. In over half the cases, the victims weren't even aware of having contact with a bat. In less than half the cases, the victims recalled seeing a bat, but weren't aware of being bitten or scratched by a bat. These animals have small, needle-like teeth and claws. Consequently, bites and scratches easily go undetected.

Rabies also can be transmitted when saliva or blood from an infected animal gets into mucous membranes eyes, nose or mouth or comes in contact with open cuts or wounds.

Rabid bats have been reported from all 48 contiguous states, at least once in Alaska, and once in Hawaii from a bat that had been inadvertently transported from the mainland.

Rabies has been isolated from at least 30 of the 39 North American bat species found north of Mexico. Although the percentage of rabid bats is low, all bats encountered should be considered rabid unless the bat is captured and found to be rabies free.

To avoid contracting bat rabies, observe the following precautions:

- Never handle a bat with your bare hands.
- If you find a dead bat on your property, use thick gloves, tongs or a shovel to throw it away.
- If you find a bat in your house, catch it and contact your local health department to have it tested for rabies.
- If your pet plays with a bat, contact your veterinarian and local health department.
- Keep bats out of the house or other buildings by plugging holes into the attic or other dark sheltered areas.
- Put screens on windows.
- If there is even a possibility that you have been exposed to rabies, talk to your medical provider about the need for rabies vaccination.

What to do if you get bitten or scratched:

- Immediately, cleanse the wound thoroughly to flush out the virus.
- Try to capture the bat to have it tested for rabies by your local health department.
- See a doctor immediately for follow-up and possible post-exposure immunization.

Pre-Exposure Immunization:

Vaccination is strongly recommended if your work involves handling bats. It consists of a series of 3 injections. Vaccination is also recommended for those who are traveling for extended periods (>30 days) to rabies endemic areas in Asia (except Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong), Africa and Latin America.

References

1. Health Information, National Center for Infectious Diseases, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Department of Health and Human Services
2. Childs, J, Krebs, J.W. and Rupprecht, C.E., "The Epidemiology of Bat Rabies in the USA", 1997 CDC, NCID, Viral and Rickettsial Zoonoses Branch

If you have any questions, please contact a Regional Public Health Consultant, park sanitarian or call WASO Public Health.

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