

Learning about bats and rabies

Most bats don't have rabies. For example, even among bats submitted for rabies testing because they could be captured, were obviously weak or sick, or had been captured by a cat, only about 6% had rabies.

Just looking at a bat, you can't tell if it has rabies. Rabies can only be confirmed in a laboratory. But any bat that is active by day or is found in a place where bats are not usually seen like in your home or on your lawn just might be rabid. A bat that is unable to fly and is easily approached could very well be sick.

Rabies is a fatal disease. Each year, tens of thousands of people are successfully protected from developing rabies through vaccination after being bitten by an animal like a bat that may have rabies. There are usually only one or two human rabies cases each year in the United States, and the most common way for people to get rabies in the United States is through contact with a bat.

Those people didn't recognize the risk of rabies from the bite of a wild animal, particularly a bat, and they didn't seek medical advice. Awareness of the facts about bats and rabies can help people protect themselves, their families, and their pets. This information may also help clear up misunderstandings about bats.

Teach children never to handle unfamiliar animals, wild or domestic, even if they appear friendly. "Love your own, leave other animals alone" is a good principle for children to learn.

Wash any wound from an animal thoroughly with soap and water and seek medical attention immediately.

Have all dead, sick, or easily captured bats tested for rabies if exposure to people or pets occurs.

Prevent bats from entering living quarters or occupied spaces in homes, churches, schools, and other similar areas where they might contact people and pets.

Bats and human rabies in the United States

Rabies in humans is rare in the United States. There are usually only one or two human cases per year. But the most common source of human rabies in the United States is from bats. For example, among the 19 naturally acquired cases of rabies in humans in the United States from 1997-2006, 17 were associated with bats. Among these, 14 patients had known encounters with bats. Four people awoke because a bat landed on them and one person awoke because a bat bit him. In these cases, the bat was inside the home.

One person was reportedly bitten by a bat from outdoors while he was exiting from his residence. Six people had a history of handling a bat while removing it from their home. One person was bitten by a bat while releasing it outdoors after finding it on the floor inside a building. One person picked up and tried to care for a sick bat found on the ground outdoors. Three men ages 20, 29 and 64 had no reported encounters with bats but died of bat-associated rabies viruses.

Why didn't these people get the rabies vaccine?

In some cases, persons who died of rabies knew they were bitten by a bat. They didn't go to a doctor, maybe because they didn't know that bats can have rabies and transmit it through a bite.

In other cases, it's possible that young children may not fully awaken due to the presence of a bat (or its bite) or may not report a bite to their parents. For example, one 4-year-old patient, who died of rabies, was still sleeping when her caregivers checked on her because they heard strange noises. They found a bat on the floor of her bedroom. She was most likely bitten and did not fully awaken. This patient developed tingling and itching on her neck at what was probably the site of a bat bite as she became sick with rabies a few weeks later.

In another case, a 10-year-old child removed a bat from his bedroom without adult supervision and several months later developed tingling and itching on his arm and one side of his head as he became sick with rabies.

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