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Bats and Rabies: Public Health Questions and Answers

How can I tell if a bat has rabies?

Rabies can be confirmed only in a laboratory. However, any bat that is active by day, is found in a place where bats are not usually seen (for example, in a room in your home or on the lawn), or is unable to fly is far more likely than others to be rabid. Such bats are often the most easily approached. Therefore, it is best **never** to handle any bat.

What should I do if I come in contact with a bat?

If you are bitten by a bat – or if infectious material (such as saliva) from a bat gets into your eyes, nose, mouth, or a wound – wash the affected area thoroughly with soap and water and get medical advice immediately. People usually know when they have been bitten by a bat.

However, because bats have small teeth which may leave marks that are not easily seen, there are situations in which you should seek medical advice even in the absence of an obvious bite wound. People cannot get rabies just from seeing a bat in an attic, in a cave, or at a distance. In addition, people cannot get rabies from having contact with bat guano (feces), blood, or urine, or from touching a bat on its fur (even though bats should never be handled!).

Are bats beneficial?

Yes. Worldwide, bats are a major predator of night-flying insects, including pests that cost farmers billions of dollars annually. Throughout the tropics, seed dispersal and pollination activities by bats are vital to rain forest survival. In addition, studies of bats have contributed to

medical advances, including the development of navigational aids for the blind. Unfortunately, many local populations of bats have been destroyed and many species are now endangered.

Why should I learn about bats and rabies?

Most of the recent human rabies cases have been caused by rabies virus from bats. 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. When people think about bats, they often imagine things that are not true. Bats are not blind. They are neither rodents nor birds. They will not suck your blood – and most do not have rabies. Bats play key roles in ecosystems around the globe, from rain forests to deserts, especially by eating insects including agricultural pests. The best protection we can offer these unique mammals is to learn more about their habits and recognize the value of living safely with them.

How do I get a possible rabid bat tested?

If you have come into direct contact with a bat or find one in your house, and you are able to safely collect the bat, place the bat into a Ziploc bag; then place that bag into a second Ziploc bag and store in the freezer. Next you need to contact a South Central Public Health District nurse: Mary Jensen at 737-5969 or Logan Hudson at 737-5929. More information on bats and rabies can also be found at www.phd5.idaho.gov.

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