

What is rabies and how do people get it?

Rabies is an infectious viral disease that affects the nervous system of humans and other mammals. People get rabies from the bite of an animal with rabies. Raccoon, skunks, foxes, coyotes, and bats can have rabies and can transmit it to people.

If untreated, rabies is a fatal disease. The goal of public health is to prevent human exposure to rabies by education and to prevent the disease by anti-rabies treatment if exposure occurs. Tens of thousands of people are successfully treated each year after being bitten by an animal that may have rabies. A few people die of rabies each year in the United States, usually because they do not recognize the risk of rabies from the bite of a wild animal and do not seek medical advice.

Why Should I Learn About Bats and Rabies?

Most of the recent human rabies cases in the United States have been caused by rabies exposure from bats. Awareness of the facts about bats and rabies can help people protect themselves, their families, and their pets.

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 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. It is best never to handle or approach any bat.

What Should I Do If I Come In Contact With A Bat?

Seek medical treatment if:

- you are bitten by a bat
- if you awaken and find a bat in your room*
- see the bat in the room of an unattended child, or*
- see the bat near a mentally impaired or intoxicated person.*

In these cases, the bat should be captured by a pest control professional and be tested for rabies. Companies specializing in bat removal are listed in the yellow pages under "pest." Fees for the service vary from company to company. To protect yourself from rabies exposure, you should never attempt to capture a bat without a professional. Pest control professionals also use euthanizing procedures that will not compromise the ability of the lab to test for rabies.

*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, these are situations in which you should seek medical advice even in the absence of an obvious bite wound.

The dead bat should be brought to the Ottawa County Health Department in Holland for testing. Please note that only dead bats are accepted for testing. The bat must be kept cold until it reaches our office. From there, we cold pack the bat and send it overnight to the state laboratory. Call 616-393-5645 for any questions.

Remember, in situations in which a bat is physically present and you cannot reasonably rule out having been bitten, have the bat captured, seek medical attention immediately, and submit the bat for rabies testing.

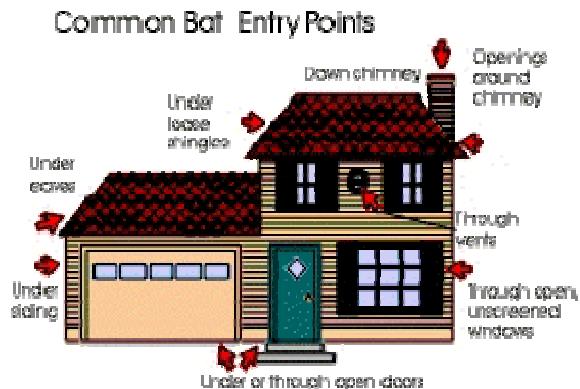
People cannot get rabies just from seeing a bat in an attic, in a cave, or at a distance. In addition, people cannot get rabies from having contact with bat guano (feces), blood, or urine, or from touching a bat on its fur (even though bats should never be handled!).

What Should I Do If My Pet Is Exposed To A Bat?

If you think your pet or domestic animal has been bitten by a bat, contact a veterinarian and have the bat tested for rabies. Remember to keep vaccinations current for cats, dogs, and other animals.

How Can I Keep Bats Out of My Home?

For assistance with "bat-proofing" your home, contact a pest control company. If you choose to do the "bat-proofing" yourself, here are some suggestions. Carefully examine your home for holes that might allow bats entry into your living quarters. Any openings larger than a quarter-inch by a half-inch should be caulked. Use window screens, chimney caps, and draft-guards beneath doors to attics, fill electrical and plumbing holes with stainless steel wool or caulking, and ensure that all doors to the outside close tightly. Most bats leave in the fall or winter to hibernate, so these are the best times to "bat-proof" your home. During summer, many young bats are unable to fly. If you exclude adult bats during this time, the young may be trapped inside and die or make their way into living quarters. Thus, if possible, avoid exclusion from May through August.



How Can Rabies Be Prevented?

- 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 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.
- Be a responsible pet owner by keeping vaccinations current for all dogs, cats, and ferrets, keeping your cats and ferrets inside and your dogs under direct supervision. Call animal control to remove stray, domestic animals from your neighborhood, and have your pets spayed or neutered.