

Bats and Rabies

Most of the recent human rabies cases in the United States 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 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 and get medical advice immediately. Whenever possible, the bat should be captured and sent to a laboratory for rabies testing (read below for information on how you can safely capture a bat in your home).

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. For example, if you awaken and find a bat in your room, see a bat in the room of an unattended child, or see a bat near a mentally impaired or intoxicated person, seek medical advice and have the bat tested.

What is a rabies exposure?

Exposure:

- a bite from a rabid bat
- saliva or brain tissue from a rabid bat gets into a scratch, wound, or mucous membrane

Potential for Exposure:

- a bat in the room with a sleeping person or unattended child
- a bat near a mentally impaired or intoxicated person
- a bat in firewood hand-carried into the house

Not an Exposure:

- a bat flying nearby
- bat guano (feces), blood, or urine
- a bat (or bats) seen in your attic or in a cave
- touching a stick or object that a bat had contacted
- touching a bat on its fur

Whenever a person has an exposure or reasonable probability of exposure to a bat, the bat should be captured and tested. If a bat is not available for testing, immediate medical consultation is advised.

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 or your local health department for assistance immediately 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?

Some bats live in buildings, and there may be no reason to evict them if there is little chance for contact with people. However, bats should always be prevented from entering rooms of your home. For assistance with “bat-proofing” your home, contact an animal-control or wildlife conservation agency. 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.

How can I safely catch a bat in my home?

If a bat is present in your home and you cannot rule out the possibility of exposure, leave the bat alone and contact an animal-control or public health agency for assistance. If professional help is unavailable, use precautions to capture the bat safely, as described below.

What you will need:

- leather work gloves (put them on)
- small box or coffee can
- piece of cardboard
- tape

When the bat lands, approach it slowly, while wearing the gloves, and place the box or coffee can over it. Slide the cardboard under the container to trap the bat inside. Tape the cardboard to the container securely, and punch small holes in the cardboard, allowing the bat to breathe. Contact your local health department or animal-control authority to make arrangements for rabies testing.