

BATS AND RABIES

Bat rabies is enzootic in the United States and detected yearly in Los Angeles County. However, it is neither feasible nor desirable, however, to control rabies in bats by programs to reduce bat populations. Bats should be excluded from houses and adjacent structures to prevent direct association with humans beings. Such structures should then be made bat-proof by sealing entrances used by bats. Since 1980, indigenously human rabies in the United States has been caused primarily by insectivorous bats. Contact with a bat should be taken seriously. Bats should not be captured, handled, or kept as pets. Human and domestic animal contact with bats should be minimized.

Bats weigh only a few ounces and they have very sharp claws and teeth. Their scratches and bites are difficult to detect. Bites by wildlife such as: coyotes, foxes, raccoons and skunks are usually obvious and often prompt suspicion of the possibility of rabies. In one instance, a 37-year-old woman was in her bathroom and felt something brush against her bottom. When she turned on the lights there was a bat hanging on the ceiling which flew out the open bathroom window. She looked at her skin and found nothing unusual. Later that day, when her physician scrutinized the area with 6X magnification, he found two pinpoint punctures about one-half centimeter apart.

Between 1980 and 2002, 29 people in the United States died of rabies associated with bats. The majority of cases were diagnosed at autopsy. None of the people received complete post-exposure prophylaxis prior to the onset of clinical disease. This is unfortunate as treatment with modern tissue culture vaccines, coupled with the appropriate use of immune globulin, is regarded as essentially 100% effective. Clear evidence of a bite was found in only two cases.

In the past, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommended rabies post-exposure vaccinations be given to anyone with an obvious bite mark or scratch from a potentially rabid animal. CDC has revised its guidelines to include a recommendation that vaccination be given to anyone who has slept in a room where a bat was known to be present, even if a bite is not visible.

Capturing a bat: Bats are not aggressive but may bite if grabbed. They should not be handled with bare hands. Wear leather or other heavy gloves whenever contact with the animal is possible. Only one person should be in the room when attempting to capture a bat. Wait for the bat to land, then cover the animal with an empty coffee can (or similar container). Slide a piece of cardboard between the container and the surface on which the bat is resting, trapping it inside. Secure the covering to the can (by heavy tape, for example) so that the bat cannot escape.
