

Going Batty in the Summertime; Summer Brings Increased Rabies Risk

Although encounters with wildlife and rabies risks can occur all year round, they increase tremendously in the summer, when both animals and people are more active. Although unwelcome visits from bats can occur at any time of the year, the likelihood increases with warm weather.

In New York (excluding New York City), rabies exposures have led to an estimated 42,000 residents undergoing postexposure rabies treatment since 1990.

Bats Account for Majority of Rabies Deaths

The frequency of bat encounters increases in warm weather because:

- bats that have migrated south for the winter return,
- bats that have overwintered in caves become more active,
- female bats establish maternal roosts in accommodating places such as home attics,
- people are outside at dusk when bats emerge from day roosts to feed on insects, and
- children at camps in rural areas may sleep in rustic buildings that may not be bat-proofed.

Bat rabies viruses have accounted for 37 of the 40 human deaths from rabies acquired in the U.S. since 1990.

Bat Tales

NYSDOH and local health departments hear about a large number of bat encounter stories during the summer.

A common scenario is bats 'dive bombing' swimming pools in the evening to catch insects. Sometimes bats are found floating in the pools.

Neither of these scenarios constitutes a rabies exposure. Even if a bat in the pool were rabid, dilution would eliminate any chance of someone swimming in the pool being exposed to the rabies virus from the bat's saliva, and pool chemicals would kill the virus.

Concern about exposure would arise only if the bat hits someone while they're in the pool area, or if the animal is touched with a bare hand when it is being removed from the skimmer basket.

Bats have small teeth and some people may not realize they have been bitten by a bat when in contact with their bare skin.

A visitor to the Zoonoses Program education booth at the State Fair reported that she woke up with a bat hanging from her lip. She knocked it away, called the local health department, and was advised to call a pest control operator or nuisance wildlife control officer to capture the bat for rabies testing.

She could not pay for that, so she opened a window and let the bat go. Although she was bitten by a bat with an estimated 3% chance of being rabid (based on proportion testing positive at the Wadsworth Center's Rabies Laboratory), she refused rabies treatment despite health recommendations for it.

She was lucky.

Rabies is a fatal disease. Once symptoms appear, there's virtually nothing that can be done to save someone. Even though the overall risk of infection in many animal encounters may be low, protective shots after an exposure is the only sure way to avoid developing this fatal disease.

New York State law requires reporting to local health departments any possible bat or other mammal exposures that may pose a rabies risk.

Information about rabies, indications for human rabies treatment, bat capture for rabies determination, and humane ways to exclude bats from living quarters, is available at the NYSDOH public Web site:

<http://www.health.state.ny.us/diseases/communicable/zoonoses/rabies/index.htm>

or on the HIN/HPN: <https://commerce.health.state.ny.us/hin/> (select Programs: Zoonoses Program/About Rabies).

Annual Rabies Laboratory summary reports and current animal rabies data can be found at: <http://www.wadsworth.org/rabies/>.

Source: New York Department of Health's Center for Community Health