People Caring for People

To: News Media
From: Dr. Robert Graham, Medical Director, Central Michigan District Health Department
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RE: Rabies Exposure

Save Dead Bats for Testing
Protect your health and your pocketbook by learning how to properly handle possible rabies exposure and dead bats

In the past two days, the health department has received more than 20 telephone calls from local citizens concerned about possible rabies exposure from bats, according to Dr. Robert Graham, Medical Director of the Central Michigan District Health Department (CMDHD), which serves Arenac, Clare, Gladwin, Isabella, Osceola and Roscommon Counties.

Dr. Graham, who also serves as Medical Director of the three-county Mid-Michigan District Health Department (MMDHD), said every county he serves has had at least one case of an individual requiring post-exposure treatment in the past 48 hours.

“July and August are the active times of year for bats and also for reports of possible bat-rabies exposure, but it’s unusual for us to receive so many calls in so short a span of time,” said Dr. Graham. “Because rabies is a fatal disease, our goal is to prevent human exposure through education and to prevent the disease through vaccination treatment if exposure occurs. If you wake up and there’s a bat in your room, then that is considered an exposure to rabies. If we can test the bat and prove it does not have rabies, the expensive and inconvenient post-exposure treatment won’t be necessary.”

Although the cost varies, the recommended treatment for even a possible rabies exposure – a course of rabies immune globulin and five doses of vaccine given over a four-week period – typically exceeds $1,000.

Rabies is an infectious viral disease that affects the nervous system of humans and other mammals. People get rabies from the bites of animals. Any wild mammal, such as a raccoon, a skunk, a fox, or a bat, can have rabies and transmit it to people.

Most of the recent human rabies cases in the United States have been caused by rabies virus from bats, according to the United States Department of Health and Human Services. Tens of thousands of people are successfully vaccinated each year after being bitten by an animal that may have rabies. Only a few people die each year of rabies in the United States – usually because they do not recognize the risk of rabies and do not seek medical advice.

Use precaution when attempting to capture a bat safely. Have leather work gloves, a small box or coffee can, a piece of cardboard and tape available. When the bat lands, approach it slowly. While wearing the gloves, place the box or coffee can over the bat. Slide the cardboard under the container to trap the bat inside. Tape the
cardboard securely to the container, and punch small holes in the cardboard, allowing the bat to breathe, and then contact the health department.

According to Dr. Graham, the main message for the public is that the best way to prevent the hardship and expense of post-exposure treatment is to not throw the bat away if you’ve killed or captured it. “If the bat can be tested for rabies, you can save thousands of dollars and a lot of headache,” he said.

Rabies can only be confirmed in a laboratory. If you find a bat in your home and have killed or captured it, do not throw it away. Contact your local health department branch office to make arrangements for rabies testing. Visit www.cmdhd.org for more information.

In addition, the Centers for Disease Control offers the following tips on how to prevent rabies:

- Teach children not to handle unfamiliar animals, wild or domestic, even if they seem friendly. “Love your own, leave others alone” is a good principle for children to learn about animals.
- 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.
- Bat-proof your house. Prevent bats from entering living quarters or occupied spaces in homes, churches, schools, and other areas where they might come into contact with 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, calling animal control to remove stray animals from your neighborhood, and considering having your pets spayed or neutered.
- Learn more about bats and rabies online at www.cmdhd.org or www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/rabies.

This article has been brought to you by Central Michigan District Health Department which serves the residents of Arenac, Clare, Gladwin, Isabella, Osceola, and Roscommon Counties.