



Recent Death of Missouri Man Serves as Reminder of Rabies Danger

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A deadly virus struck close to home in December, when a 55 year-old Missouri man died of rabies from a bite of an infected bat. Under the assumption that the bat did not carry rabies because it survived three days after the bite, he released the bat from his home and did not seek rabies post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) until his symptoms started. Unfortunately, this mistake proved fatal. The rabies death was the first in the state of Missouri since 1959.

What is rabies and how is it transmitted?

Rabies is a viral infection of the central nervous system, usually contracted from the bite (specifically saliva) of an infected mammal. Exposure may occur if the animal's saliva enters an open cut or mucous membrane (nose, mouth, eyes).

How widespread is rabies?

The disease is found in all states except Hawaii, as well as in Canada, Mexico and most other countries around the world. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) revealed that there were approximately 3.5 cases of human rabies in the United States each year between 1990 and 2004.

The last reported case of human rabies in Illinois was in 1954. However, in 2007, 435 people were reported to have had a possible exposure to rabies. For 81 percent of these persons, their exposure was to a bat. This risk does not seem to be lessening. In fact, the identification of rabies in animals is on the rise in Illinois, where more than 100 bats tested positive for rabies in 2008.

What animals are at risk for rabies?

High-risk species for rabies in Illinois include bats, skunks, raccoons, fox and coyotes. Additionally, cats, dogs and livestock can get rabies if unvaccinated. On the other hand, many small mammals, such as chipmunks, gerbils, guinea pigs, hamsters, mice, rabbits, rats and squirrels, rarely get rabies. Birds, fish, insects, lizards, snakes and turtles never acquire this virus.

Rabies is an increasing threat to cats; in fact, the number of reported feline cases of rabies in the United States far exceeds that of all other domestic animals. Even indoor cats are at risk, as many rabid bats are found inside homes.

What are the signs of rabies in an animal?

The first sign of rabies is usually a change in the animal's behavior. A common misconception is that an animal with rabies must be "foaming at the mouth". A more typical presentation would be difficulty walking, a general appearance of sickness or a change in the animal's normal behavior. A rabid animal usually dies within one week after showing signs of the disease.

What are the signs of rabies in people?

Rabies virus can have an incubation period that lasts an average of 40 days in people before symptoms of fatigue, fever and headache appear. Damage to the nervous system typically appears a week later, with symptoms that can include hallucinations and seizures. Eventually rabies will cause respiratory or cardiac arrest and is fatal if not treated early.

What if a pet is exposed to a rabid animal?

If a pet has been in a fight with another animal, consult with your veterinarian. A vaccinated pet may need a booster dose of rabies vaccine as soon as possible.

Unvaccinated dogs or cats exposed to an untested or rabid bat are recommended for euthanasia (or alternatively 6 months quarantine) to protect the family from any potential exposure to rabies.

What if a person is exposed or bitten by a rabid animal?

Wash the wound thoroughly with soap and water and seek medical attention immediately. The local health department or the county animal control office also should be notified immediately.

Many people receive bites from bats when they attempt to capture the bat in their home themselves. Place a container over the bat and close the door to that room but do not attempt to pick up the bat. Additionally, do not release the bat from the home until local authorities determine if the bat needs to be tested. The majority of bats (93 to 97 percent) will test negative for rabies, but if a bat is untested it has to be assumed to be rabid.

If an apparently healthy domestic dog, cat or ferret bites a human, it must be captured, confined and professionally observed for 10 days following the bite. If the animal remains healthy during this period, it would not have transmitted rabies at the time of the bite. There is no reliable observation period established for non-domestic animals. If a person is bitten by a non-domestic animal and it is available for testing, testing should be done immediately. If an animal suspected of having rabies cannot be observed or tested, or if it tests positive for rabies, treatment of the individual with PEP must begin immediately.

What can people do to protect themselves and their pets from rabies?

- Do not feed, touch or adopt wild animals or stray dogs or cats.
- Dogs and cats need to be up-to-date on their rabies vaccinations. Vaccinated pets are buffers between rabid wildlife and humans. Consult with your veterinarian about when your pet needs to be vaccinated.
- Do not allow pets to roam free. Obey leash laws.
- Do not attract wild animals to your home or yard. Store bird seed or other animal feed in containers with tight-fitting lids. Always feed pets indoors. Make sure garbage cans are tightly capped. Board up any openings to your attic, basement, porch or garage. Cap chimneys with screens.
- Encourage children to immediately tell an adult if they are bitten or scratched by an animal. Teach children not to approach or to touch any unknown animal.
- Report all animal bites to the local animal control. State laboratories will test any high-risk animal for rabies if it has exposed either a person or a domestic animal.

The CDC has an information sheet on bat-related rabies, how to handle encounters with bats, and how to "bat-proof" your home. Find it online at www.cdc.gov/print.do?url=http%3A//www.cdc.gov/RABIES/bats.html.