

Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency

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Warm Weather, Bats and Rabies!

Coldwater, MI — Hot days followed by warmer nights are here, meaning that windows are open most of the time. It's the time of year that bats can easily find their way into your home... do you know what to do if you encounter a bat?

Nearly all wild animals, and specifically bats, can carry rabies. To date this summer, the Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency has submitted at least 15 bat heads to the State Laboratory for rabies testing. While none of the bats have tested positive for rabies, Paul Andriacchi, Environmental Health Director sees these submissions as a call for awareness.

“Rabies is transmitted when an infected animal bites or scratches a person's skin,” Andriacchi states. “Even a minor scratch may be enough to transmit the rabies virus from an animal to human. Bat bites may not be noticed because bat teeth are very tiny and razor sharp and a bat bite can be no bigger than a needle prick. Therefore, any direct contact with a bat should be considered a possible rabies exposure.”

A healthy bat typically avoids any contact with humans or animals and usually will not be found resting on the ground. Bats with rabies are often disoriented which increases the likelihood that they will end up inside a structure by accident. If someone wakes up to find a bat in the room, or a bat is found in the room of an unattended small child, an intoxicated or mentally incapacitated person, or a family pet, the possibility exists that a bat bite, scratch -- or direct contact -- may have occurred. Bats flying overhead, and bats that have not had direct contact with humans or animals, do not pose a risk for transmitting rabies.

“Bats should be captured only if there has been direct contact with a person or pet or if the bat was found in the vicinity of someone who might have been exposed.

Once these bats are captured, they should be tested for rabies infection,” Andriacchi adds. “**Do not release a live bat or throw out a dead bat that has bitten or scratched, or had direct contact with a person or pet**, unless the health department has told you that it will not be necessary to test the bat. Take care not to injure the bat’s brain, as that is what will be tested for the rabies virus.”

Suggestions to safely capture a bat:

1. ***Never handle a bat with bare hands.*** *Wear thick gloves to pick up a dead or injured bat or pick up the bat with a shovel or dust pan.*
2. *For a **live** bat, wait until the bat has landed. Place an empty can or wastebasket over the bat and slide cardboard underneath to contain the bat.*
3. *If the bat is still flying, try gently striking it with a broom or tennis racket in order to knock it down. You can also try to capture it in a net.*
4. *Use heavy gloves (like leather work gloves) to place the bat in a sealed can or jar, or place it in a plastic bag that is within another heavy-weight plastic bag such as a zip-lock bag. For a live bat, punch small holes (less than ½ inch in diameter) in the container(s) for the bat to breathe. Place the container in a quiet area away from heavy human traffic. **Do not refrigerate, freeze or kill a live bat.***
5. *Dead bats that will be sent to a laboratory for testing should be refrigerated (not frozen) until the laboratory can begin testing. **Do not refrigerate, freeze or kill a live bat.***

In 2015, there were three rabid bats identified in the tri-county area. While no rabid bats have been reported this year, there is always a chance that one could be positive. If you or your pet comes into direct contact with a bat, be sure to carefully trap it as outlined above and submit it to the health department for testing.

If you continue to find bats in the home, it’s time to inspect the house to find out how they are entering. Carefully examine your home for holes that might allow bats entry into your living quarters. Caulk any openings larger than a quarter-inch by a half-inch (the size of a match book). 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. Also, check windows to make sure that they are not slipping down at the top, leaving space for bats to enter. In

addition, you can prevent bats from roosting in attics or buildings by covering outside entry points. Observe where the bats exit at dusk and keep them from coming back by loosely hanging clear plastic sheeting or bird netting over these areas. Bats can crawl out and leave, but cannot re-enter. When all the bats are gone, the openings can be permanently sealed. **Caution:** Avoid doing this from May through August. If there are young bats in your attic, many of them can't fly and keeping the adults out will trap the young who will die or try to make their way into your rooms. Most bats leave in the fall or winter to hibernate, so these are the best times to "bat-proof" your home.

To learn more tips that can help you protect your family's health, visit our website at www.bhsj.org and click on "Quick Info About Health Topics" button located on the left side.

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