



## **NEWS RELEASE**

### **ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH**

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#### **Do not handle bats, Greensboro child exposed to rabies**

#### **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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A young child's recent exposure to a rabid bat in Greensboro has caused local and state health authorities to issue a reminder about the potential dangers of handling bats. Bats, along with raccoons, are the primary reservoirs for rabies in Alabama.

Rabies is a viral infection in mammals that is transmitted by bites, scratches or other contact with infected saliva. Rabies virus is present only in saliva and nervous tissue; it is not transmitted through contact with guano (bat feces), blood or urine from infected animals.

Estimates vary, but generally it is estimated that 0.5 to 2 percent of the bat population is positive for rabies. Oftentimes infected bats will not be able to fly or will be out during the day, but bats can also be infected without showing signs. Therefore, laboratory testing is the only definitive method for identifying rabies-positive bats that may have exposed humans. In 2014, the Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH) has reported 16 laboratory-confirmed rabies-positive bats.

Rabies is a fatal disease if left untreated, but is preventable if proper treatment is received soon following the bite or scratch. Anyone exposed to a bat should consult with a medical provider immediately.

According to Dr. Dee W. Jones, State Public Health Veterinarian, the most important step to take following a potential bat exposure is not to kill the bat by blunt-force trauma. He states, "The challenge is collecting the bat without further exposing yourself, so gloves should be worn and a shovel, net or other tools can be used to avoid touching it if possible."

ADPH recommends putting the bat in a container with air holes and taking it to a licensed veterinarian for euthanasia. Dr. Jones states that trauma to the head of the bat is the most common reason that accurate testing cannot be performed. The end result of mauled or damaged specimens is people have to take treatment for rabies who otherwise would not have needed to if testing could have been performed. The treatment regimen is one dose of rabies immunoglobulin and a series of four vaccine doses over a two-week period.

Bats are considered to be a higher risk for rabies transmission to humans than other wildlife because of a unique feature not found in most other common rabies carriers. Bats have very small teeth that can puncture the skin. Their bites are often somewhat painless and may not leave characteristic bite wounds.

Although most people should definitely feel a bite from the bat, there are some situations in which a person could be bitten and not be aware of it. Examples of people that could be exposed and either not know it or not be able to tell someone include the following:

- A person sleeping
- A mentally impaired person
- An infant or toddler

For this reason, there are very strict guidelines concerning bat exposures to reduce the chance of rabies infections.

According to Dr. Jones, "Exposure to bats is more complicated than other animal bites because not only is there a lack of awareness that bats can have rabies, but also that their bites may be much more subtle than the typical animal bite."

Bats have been the sole cause of all human rabies fatalities acquired within the United States over the past 20 years. Alabama has had one human death from rabies in that period, but many more reported exposures that resulted in the need for rabies preventative treatment.

Although, bats do have an associated public health risk, they are a very important species to nature. They consume insects, biting pests and pollinate flowers; the only problem arises when there is human contact.

"Problems arise when bats and humans inhabit the same dwellings," Dr. Jones said. "It is common for bats to roost in the rafters and attics of houses, schools or other buildings and occasionally some of the bats can get inside of the living quarters. Contrary to popular thought, the age of the building doesn't necessarily indicate the risk of having a bat roost. We have investigated reports of roosts in newer buildings and sports stadiums on school campuses, as well as older buildings in the community."

The ADPH recommends that people should follow the advice of wildlife officials, licensed exterminators and contractors on how to exclude bats from a building. Follow these basic steps to best protect yourself from exposure to bats and rabies:

- If you are bitten or scratched by a bat, seek medical attention immediately.
- If you awaken and find a bat in your bedroom or in the room of an unattended child or a mentally impaired person, seek advice from your medical provider and report it to your county health department.
- If possible, collect the bat in an escape-proof container with air holes and take to a local veterinarian for euthanasia. Do not induce trauma by blunt force.
- If you see a bat in your home and you are sure no human or pet exposure has occurred, confine the bat to a room by closing all doors and windows leading out of the room except those to the outside. The bat will probably leave soon.

- Please refer to <http://www.adph.org/epi/default.asp?id=3385> for more advice about bat infestations and exposures.

For more information about rabies risk locally or in Alabama please contact the Hale County Health Department at (334) 624-3018 or the ADPH Division of Epidemiology at (800) 338-8374.

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