

Bats in Bedrooms: Assessing Risk

Overview

Washington state is home to many bats, the majority of which are healthy and vital to our ecosystem. A small portion of bats carry the rabies virus. The virus is in the bat's saliva and brain tissue, and can be spread to people through a bite, scratch, or other contact with a mucous membrane, wound, or non-intact skin. Finding a bat in the bedroom generally provides a low risk of rabies exposure. If a person has no known direct contact with a bat in their bedroom, post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) is generally NOT recommended.

What is Rabies?

Rabies is a viral disease that infects the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord). All warm-blooded mammals, including humans, are susceptible to rabies. In a person exposed to rabies, infection can be prevented if treatment is given before symptoms appear. After symptoms appear, it almost always leads to death. Each year, an average of 3-10% of bats submitted for testing have rabies. Less than 1% of bats in the wild are infected with rabies. Rabid bats have been found in almost every county in Washington.

Assessing Exposure

Only people who may have been exposed to a bat or other potentially rabid animal should consider treatment for rabies. It is critical for people who have been exposed to rabies to receive treatment. However, overly cautious recommendations for PEP can place large financial burdens on patients unnecessarily. Public health workers and health care providers should help determine risk of exposure.

Any person reporting a known bite, scratch, or mucous membrane exposure should receive PEP. Likewise, any direct contact with bare skin, such as a bat landing on or flying into a person, should most likely result in a recommendation for PEP. Circumstances that involve young children, individuals with cognitive impairment, or persons unable to reliably recall contact should be handled conservatively.

¹De Serres et al. Clin Infect Dis. 2009

Resources: [Bat Proofing Your Home](#), [Prevention of Human Rabies](#)
For more information visit doh.wa.gov, call 206-418-5500, or email zd.doh.wa.gov.

Bats in the Bedroom

When a person wakes up to find a bat in the same room with them, the decision to administer PEP should be based on the certainty about whether direct contact may have occurred. Many healthy adults would wake to bat contact and may elect to forgo PEP if no contact was noted. Persons who cannot be reasonably certain that a bite, scratch, or mucous membrane exposure did not occur, due to being a deep sleeper; drug, alcohol, or medication use; or other cognitive impairment should receive PEP. Children should likewise receive PEP. People sleeping in nearby or adjacent areas to a room where a bat was found should not receive PEP unless additional investigation determines direct contact was likely.

It is important to note that a bat in the bedroom scenario without known contact is generally considered low risk. Based on a study performed in Canada¹, the incidence of human rabies due to a bat in the bedroom without recognized contact was 1 case per 2.7 billion person-years. The number of people needed to treat with PEP to prevent a single case of human rabies in that context ranges from 314,000 to 2.7 million.

¹De Serres et al. Clin Infect Dis. 2009

Other Situations

Identification of dead bats, or a bat in a room where a person was not sleeping, should not result in a recommendation for rabies PEP unless additional investigation determines direct contact was likely.

Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP)

Rabies in humans is 100% preventable through prompt and appropriate medical care. Safe and effective PEP treatment following rabies exposure should begin as soon as possible after the exposure occurs. PEP treatment is a series of shots. These shots include one dose of human rabies immunoglobulin (HRIG) and four doses of rabies vaccine given on a specific schedule over a 14-day period. People with weakened immune systems will also need a fifth dose of vaccine and a blood test to check that the vaccine was effective.