

*epi*TRENDS

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Rabies Education, K-12

Washington State Department of Health has developed a new suite of materials for educators and school nurses to teach students in kindergarten through 12th grade about rabies and how to avoid exposure to the disease. These materials are available without charge on the Department's website (Resources).



Rabies and Children

Globally there are tens of thousands of rabies deaths each year, 40% in children under 15 years. In many countries the main reservoirs for rabies are dogs and cats, putting children at particular risk for petting or for being chased by a rabid animal. In Washington, children are 20% of those reported to have had a suspected exposure to rabies.

Rabies virus has adapted to specific animal reservoir hosts (such as bats, skunks, foxes, and other mammals) and these variants can be found in specific parts of the United States. In Washington the only known reservoir for rabies is bats. All bat species in Washington can carry rabies. When a living or dead bat is found in a classroom, outside in a play area, or during a class trip, it is important that children are aware of the risk of rabies and that adults know how to prevent and respond to exposures.

The Department's rabies prevention education resources were specifically designed for an audience of K–12 students and adults working with those students. The resources can be used by school nurses and staff to educate students about rabies and as a guide for handling a situation of potential rabies exposure. The materials were designed to increase awareness about rabies, to provide guidance on steps to take if a bat is found around students, and to outline the steps a school should take in the event of a suspected rabies exposure event.



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New Educational Tools

The new suite of rabies educational materials includes posters and two presentations. One presentation is for educators and one for K-12 students. Topics covered include the disease of rabies and how people can be exposed to it.



A poster instructs what to do if a person finds a bat. A bat that could have exposed children to rabies should be contained, students or staff with possible exposure identified, first aid provided as needed, and the local health jurisdiction contacted to determine if there has been a risk from the bat and whether testing should be done. The poster has QR codes that can be scanned to get more information about capturing a bat, providing first aid, and contacting the local health jurisdiction. .

Public health interviews with children and staff are important to determine the behavior and appearance of the animal as well as the severity and location of the exposure. This information can help public health determine the need to test the bat for rabies or to recommend post-exposure prophylaxis for rabies prevention. The local health jurisdiction can assist a school in deciding when it is appropriate to notify parents that a bat was discovered around students and together develop a notification letter about rabies risk, laboratory testing, and treatment.



I FOUND A BAT!
WHAT DO I DO?

WHAT TO DO IF YOU FIND A BAT:

Contain the bat where others cannot come into contact with it (close windows and doors to the room). If possible, place a heavy box or bucket over the bat. If the bat is dead, wear gloves and use a shovel or other tool to double-bag the bat.

SCAN FOR CAPTURE INFO


Identify any students or staff who may have had contact with the bat. Record the details of each possible exposure to share with your local health jurisdiction. These details will be important in determining if an exposure occurred.

Provide basic first aid immediately if needed. Wash any wounds thoroughly with soap and running water. Refer to the "Animal Bites and Scratches" section of the Infectious Disease Control Guide for School Staff

SCAN FOR GUIDE


Contact your local health jurisdiction to determine if the bat needs to be tested for rabies and if any student or staff should receive post-exposure treatment.

SCAN FOR CONTACT INFO


Department:
Phone #:

Consider notifying parents that a bat was discovered at the school, if their student may have had contact with the bat, or if the bat is being tested for rabies to encourage them to ask their children if they touched a bat at school. Your local health jurisdiction can help you with this determination.

ABOUT RABIES

- Bats in Washington can carry rabies. People can get infected with rabies by being bitten or scratched by an infected bat.
- If a person does not receive the appropriate medical care after a potential rabies exposure, infection with the virus is almost always fatal. Timely treatment after an exposure prevents rabies infection.

- Any potential human exposure to a bat requires careful assessment as a bite wound can go unnoticed due to bat's tiny but sharp teeth.
- Bats that are captured can be humanely euthanized, if needed, and tested for rabies to inform treatment decisions.



For more information, visit doh.wa.gov. DOH 420-666, February 2025. To request this document in another format, call 1-800-525-0127. Deaf or hard of hearing customers, please call 711 (Washington Relay) or email doh.information@doh.wa.gov.

Preventing Rabies

Each year, between 200 and 250 bats in Washington are tested for rabies and about 3-10% test positive. Most testing occurs after human contact with the bat is identified, such as a bite or bare-hand contact. The actual prevalence of rabies in bats in the wild is predicted to be much lower than the sample of bats tested.

Since 1990 the only other animals in the state testing positive for rabies have been a horse (1992), a llama (1994), and two cats (2002 and 2015). Bat rabies virus variant was identified or suspected in these animals. Elsewhere in the United States and its territories rabies can be carried by raccoons, foxes, skunks, and mongooses. Globally dogs are the animals most likely to transmit rabies to humans while other animals such as bats as well as foxes and various canids are also reservoirs.

Proper post-exposure prophylaxis administration following exposure is essential for preventing cases of human rabies. The medications are given as a series over several weeks and treatment is almost entirely successful if completed before symptoms of rabies occur. Once rabies infection develops, survival is extremely rare.

When a bat is present under circumstances where children could be exposed, local health jurisdictions are key in handling the situation correctly. A jurisdiction can evaluate the risk of exposure, arrange testing of a bat, and coordinate with the school for appropriate notifications before or after testing. A proper response can prevent unnecessary and expensive post-exposure treatment. The Office of Communicable Disease Epidemiology has staff available for consultations with the local health jurisdictions, and can also provide a letter template for a school to develop its own version for parental notification.

Globally, bats have a valuable contribution to the environment and the economy. They consume quantities of pest insects, and also pollinate and disseminate some plants. These rabies educational materials were designed to promote safety by teaching children to respect bats from a distance and by instructing staff on the correct actions if children are around a bat. Office of Communicable Disease Epidemiology appreciates our local and Tribal health partners for using and distributing these materials to their communities.

Resources

Rabies resources from the Washington State Department of Health include General Information, Rabies Educational Materials for K-12, and materials for veterinarians, public health agencies, and healthcare providers:

<https://doh.wa.gov/public-health-provider-resources/notifiable-conditions/rabies-resources>

Additional Department of Health resources related to rabies are provided for local health jurisdictions as well as the public:

[Rabies and Animal Bites](#)

Local health jurisdiction links:

<https://doh.wa.gov/about-us/washingtons-public-health-system/washington-state-local-health-jurisdictions>