Use Caution Around Bats

Missouri is home to 14 kinds of bats. Although most bats aren't infected by rabies, it is estimated that 6% of bats have rabies. The most common source of human rabies in the United States is from bats. For example, among the 19 naturally acquired cases of rabies in humans from 1997 – 2006, 17 were associated with bats. Among these, 14 patients had known encounters with bats.

Rabies is a fatal disease. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that tens of thousands of people are successfully treated each year after being bitten by an animal that may have rabies, and it adds that a few people die every year because they don't seek treatment. Rabies is 100% preventable – by ensuring pets are vaccinated and by avoiding contact with wild animals. In 2008, Missouri experienced its first case of human rabies since 1959. The patient had a known bite from a bat on the ear. The patient released the bat and refused the rabies post exposure prophylaxis vaccine, which could have saved his life.

It is impossible to determine if a bat has rabies just by looking at it; rabies must be confirmed by having the animal tested in a laboratory. Any bat that is active by day or is found in a place where bats are not usually seen, like in your home, just might be rabid. A bat that is unable to fly and is easily approached could be sick.

Most bats have very small teeth which may leave marks that disappear quickly. In addition to a bite, exposure to saliva or brain material from a bat can also transmit rabies.

Take steps to prevent bats from entering living quarters or occupied in homes, churches, and other areas where they might contact people and pets.

- 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. 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.
- 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. When all the bats are gone, the openings can be permanently sealed.

For more information, call the Springfield-Greene County Health Department at (417) 864-1658.

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