



HEALTH NEWS FROM DR. YU

Thurston County Public Health & Social Services Department

Summer Months Bring Warmer Weather, Bats, Bites and Bugs!

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With the summer heat finally arriving last week, the Health Department has been getting a lot more calls about bats and animal bites. We open our windows to cool down our homes and in the process, may actually let in flying insects and the bats that feed on them.

Bats are an important part of our ecosystem, however, they do not belong inside a home. In Washington, bats are the animal of most concern for rabies — about five to seven percent of those tested in the past 20 years were rabid. With the warmer temperature, many folks have had unexpected encounters with bats because they leave their windows open. A good rule of thumb if you find a bat in your home is to capture it very, very carefully but **DO NOT LET IT GO!!**

Rabies is a viral disease that attacks the central nervous system in mammals. Early symptoms are similar to other illnesses – fever, headache, and general weakness. Later symptoms include insomnia, hallucinations, and anxiety. Death usually occurs days after these more advanced symptoms begin. People exposed to a rabid animal must receive anti-rabies vaccines to prevent the disease. The virus can be transmitted after a bite from an infected animal. It can also be spread to open wounds or mucous membranes by an infected animal's saliva.

Bats are not aggressive animals and most of them don't have rabies. Those seen flying at dusk and feeding on insects are usually healthy (99%) and will avoid contact with people. However, a bat that is flying during the day or appears sick and unable to fly is more likely to be rabid. All wildlife should be avoided and never handled.

While bats are migrating in the spring and fall, they may temporarily rest in unusual places, such as attics. If you find a bat in the house, close the doors and windows to the room; wear leather or other thick gloves; capture the bat in a pan or can without touching it; seal the container; and **DO NOT RELEASE THE BAT**. Bats can chew through paper and plastic bags or boxes. Call your local health department (in Thurston County, call 867-2667) and we will help you determine if any people or pets in your home may have been exposed and can arrange to test the bat for rabies, if needed. "Bat proof" your home by making sure open windows have screens and that other small entry points are sealed. Bats can enter through a quarter inch gap! Filling cracks and crevices around your house might help save you from having to get a series of rabies shots.

We have rarely seen rabies in animals other than bats in Washington State. In other parts of the United States, dogs, foxes, coyotes, raccoons, and skunks are known to carry rabies.

Speaking of which, animal bites are another common problem every summer. Try not to get in the middle of your pet's encounter with wild animals. Wild animals that are injured or with their young will naturally be more protective and more likely to bite. Do not pick up injured animals. If you do get bit, clean the site with soap and water. Contact your health care provider to determine the potential for rabies exposure, the need for treatment, and to decide whether or not to test the animal for rabies. Make sure all your pets and other animals (dogs, cats, goats, horses etc.) are current on their rabies vaccine.

For more information on rabies, see the Department of Health website (www.doh.wa.gov/EHSPHL/factsheet/rabiesfct.htm) or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention rabies page (www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/rabies/default.htm).

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