

Information for when discussing rabies with the public

Rabies is an extremely serious health concern and bats are a reservoir for rabies. HOWEVER, the benefits that bats provide to humans far outweigh the risk they present. For perspective:

- Number of people that died in Canada in 2002 due to smoking-related illness: 39,000.
 - Number of people that die every year in Canada due to car accidents: about 2, 800 per year.
 - Number of people that die every year in Canada due to anaphylactic shock from food allergy: 12 per year.
 - Number of people that die every year in Canada from being hit by lightning: 9 to 10 deaths per year.
 - Number of people that have died in Canada due to bat-related rabies; 7 since 1950 (including the 2019 case in BC)...that is 7 people in 69 years.
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- The 2019 rabies death in BC highlights the need for people to respond correctly to encounters with all wildlife, bats included.
 - The best approach is to always leave wild animals alone.
 - If a bat must be handled, e.g. to remove it from a building, it is essential to use gloves and follow appropriate procedures, such as those on the link on our website.
 - If a dead bat is reported you, always screen for potential human or pet contact - always follow the steps in the sick/dead bat protocol.
 - Any direct contact with a bat must be taken very seriously. Local Public Health Units, doctors, and emergency room workers can all advise on the risk of rabies exposure after a human has been in contact with a bat.
 - Rabies vaccinations are effective in preventing the disease if received immediately after exposure - this is why people need to contact public health immediately.
 - Contact between pets and bats must also be taken seriously, and a vet consulted immediately to assess the appropriate course of action - usually a booster shot is required for pets that are already immunized.
 - For more detailed information on rabies, people can contact the BC Centre for Disease Control - they have a rabies specialist on staff.
 - Although bats in BC do carry rabies, the rabies level in wild populations is < 1 %, unlike the 13 % rabies rate reported for bats that are turned in for testing. The bats turned in are those that are more likely to be behaving oddly, so this leads to an increased perceived rate of rabies.
 - Living with bats, in buildings, outbuildings, and bat houses, can and is accomplished safely across the province and Canada.
 - When living with bats, care is obviously needed to ensure that humans and pets do not come into direct contact with bats, but this usually just involves ensuring that all roost spaces are separate from human living space.
 - Stewards of bat colonies enjoy many rewards from hosting colonies on their property. All bats in BC are insectivorous, and eat large amounts of insects each night, including mosquitos and agricultural and forest pests.
 - We sincerely hope that the tragic event of a recent mortality does not turn public opinion, at a time when bats are facing various conservation crises, including large-scale mortality from white-nose syndrome.

- Keeping bat roosts safe across BC is essential to ensuring bats have the habitats they will require to weather and recover from white-nose.
- Keeping bat populations healthy is essential to all of us who depend on healthy forests and agriculture.

Rabies quotes from various documents

- Rabies (aka hydrophobia) is a very serious zoonotic (from animals) disease caused by a rabies virus.
- It is transmitted through saliva (spit), or cerebral spinal fluid, usually by the bite or scratch of a mammal.
- This virus infects the brain and nervous system of mammals. If not treated in time, a rabies infection is almost always fatal.
- The disease can be prevented by vaccination, but the best prevention is avoidance.
- In BC, bats are currently the only known reservoir of rabies.
- Since reporting began in 1924, there have been two rabies related deaths from bats in BC. Note that there was also a BC person who contracted rabies in Alberta (not in BC)
- Bats and other wild animals deserve our respect, and should not be touched or bothered, which can lead to potentially harmful contacts.
- Avoid contact with any wild or unfamiliar animal.
- Never touch a bat with your bare hands.
- <1% of wild bats carry rabies
- 13% of bats submitted for rabies testing (e.g. behaving strangely, suspicious, sample biased toward sick bats) in BC test positive for rabies
- Vaccinate your pets against rabies.
- If you are bitten or scratched by an animal that you think may have rabies, you should:
 1. Immediately wash the wound well with soap and water under moderate pressure (e.g. a running tap) for at least 15 minutes, then flush thoroughly with water. This lessens the chance of any infection.
 2. Seek medical attention from your doctor or local public health unit (<http://www.immunizebc.ca/finder>) immediately.
- Bats play an essential role in BC's ecosystem. For example, all species of bats found in BC eat insects, which helps control the population size of pest insects. Bats provide ~23 billion/yr in pest control services to U.S. Agriculture.

- If you would like to learn more about bats, contact the BC Community Bat Program www.bcbats.ca
- “Some bats live in buildings, and there’s no reason to evict them if there is little chance for contact with people.” Centres for Disease Control and Prevention

More information

- <https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/health-topics/hw181108>
- Rabies in BC Brochure: <http://www.bccdc.ca/resource-gallery/Documents/Educational%20Materials/Epid/Zoonoses/rabiesbrochure.pdf>
- <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/rabies/surveillance.html>
- http://lsg.biology.ualberta.ca/facilities/safety/uploads/PDF/Lightning-relatedinjuriesandfatalitiesinCanada_FINAL-TECHNICAL_1-September-06.pdf
- <http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/rabies>
- <https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthlinkbc-files/rabies>
- <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/environment/plants-animals-and-ecosystems/wildlife-wildlife-habitat/wildlife-health/wildlife-health-documents/rabies.pdf>
- <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/rabies/surveillance.html>
- Contact Public Health Authority for questions, <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/about-bc-s-health-care-system/partners/health-authorities/regional-health-authorities>
- Or Erin Fraser (778) 677-7790 Erin.Fraser@bccdc.ca, Public Health Veterinarian, Centre for Disease Control
- Rate of rabies in wild Hoary and Silver-haired Bats see <https://www.jwildlifedis.org/doi/pdf/10.7589/0090-3558-47.1.64>