



Bats

Preventing Rabies Exposure



Tis the season for all things dark and spooky, and this month's health tips have decided to focus on a staple of the holidays: bats. These diverse and wonderful creatures have over 40 distinct species across the United States, and are commonly insectivores, meaning that they eat insects, many of which are pests. Some bats are endangered and thus have protected status. They play a crucial role in the ecosystem and can assist in reducing the rates of other harmful pests. However, bats are wild animals, and like all wild animals, interacting with them can carry risks. For bats, that risk is rabies.

Bats are one of the most common causes of rabies cases in the US. The reasons for this are numerous. Some have to do with a bat's unique biology, but the bat's small size and relatively unassuming bite is also a common cause. Folks are usually very ready and aware of serious animal bites, such as a dog or fox. But the tiny pricks of a bat bite might not be so frequently reported. Thus, even though *most* bats don't have rabies, they still pose an elevated rabies risk compared to many other wild animals. The following tips will help you learn how to protect yourself and others from rabies exposure caused by bats, and what to do if you have contact with a bat.

Bat Basics

- The largest concern regarding bats is possible rabies exposure. Remember: you can be possibly exposed to rabies through contact with saliva or brain tissue, specifically if it comes into contact with your nose, eyes, mouth, or open wounds.
- You cannot contract rabies through coming into contact with bat urine, feces, or blood. You also cannot contract rabies from touching their fur. However, they are wild animals, and all caution should still be taken before handling a live bat.
- Bat bites are very small and can be quite subtle. Most times, you'll know when you've been bitten. However, in some cases, that may not be the case:
 - If you or another person was unconscious or asleep indoors, and a bat is in the room, you should assume possible contact.
 - If you or another person was unconscious or asleep outdoors, and a bat is found on/near them, you should assume possible contact.
 - Individuals who are intoxicated, have a mental illness that impairs their awareness, memory, or judgment, or young children or very elderly, and have been in the same room as a bat while unattended shall assume to have been in contact with a bat.
- Once you've established that you have had contact with a bat (specifically by a bite or exposure to their saliva/brain tissue), you should contact your local board of health or a qualified medical professional as soon as possible. You may need to get postexposure prophylaxis (otherwise called PEP, or rabies vaccine).
- PEP is effective at preventing rabies symptoms.
- If the bat you were exposed to is available for capture, you should do so (see below). The bat should be delivered for testing to the MADPH Rabies Lab. Contact your local board of health to arrange for delivery.
 - If the bat tests negative for rabies, PEP may not be necessary.
 - If the bat tests positive for rabies, PEP is likely necessary.
- If the bat is not available, contact your local board of health or a certified health professional to assess whether you need PEP.

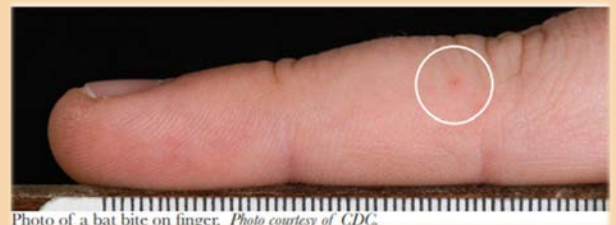
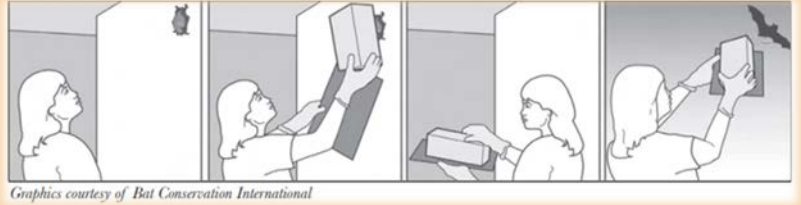


Photo of a bat bite on finger. Photo courtesy of CDC.

To Catch a Bat

Ideally, when you spot a bat near you and you suspect possible exposure, you should capture the animal so it can be tested for rabies at a state lab. Follow the steps below to secure your bat for transport.

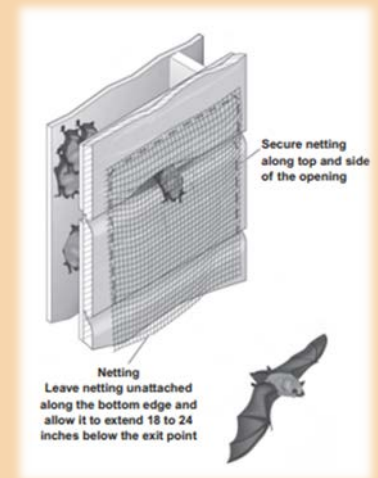
- Contact either your local board of health, local animal control officer, or a local wildlife conservation agency for assistance. They may be able to send someone out to capture the bat for you.
- If no assistance is available, you can capture the bat yourself.
- First, find a container large enough for the bat, such as a box or coffee can. Make sure it's durable.
- Put on a pair of leather or other sturdy worker gloves.
- Take a piece of thin cardboard and poke a few airholes inside it.
- Wait for the bat to land and then approach slowly. Put the container over the bat and then slide the cardboard underneath. Be careful not to damage the bat's head when capturing it, as the brain must be intact for lab work.
- Secure the cardboard to the container with tape. Contact your local board of health to arrange delivery to a state lab. If you are certain no possible exposure occurred, the bat should be released back into the wild.
- Be aware of any local or state regulations regarding bats. Some species of bats are endangered, and thus there is a different protocol for removal or capture.



Keeping Bats Out

Like with many other animals, there are ways to reduce the likelihood that you will come into contact with bats. If you are camping or otherwise outside, you can take steps to secure your shelter against bats. You can also “bat-proof” your home to reduce the likelihood that a bat can get inside the house.

- Make sure that you “bat-proof” only between the months of September – April. Bats tend to migrate during these months and are absent from your home. However, bat-proofing too early or too late can possibly trap bats inside your home, especially juveniles that have not learned to fly.
- When staying outdoors, remain in some form of shelter, such as a tent.
- When sleeping outdoors or in a camping cabin, use mosquito netting over your mattress.
 - To properly install mosquito netting, elevate the netting above the bed,
 - Cover the length of the mattress,
 - Attach poles to the ends of the bed.
 - Tuck netting under the mattress.
 - At the end of the season, store the netting in rodent-proof containers.
 - Inspect the netting regularly for holes which might necessitate replacement of the net.
- For indoor areas, make sure to find and seal and cracks or holes, just as you might to keep out other animals such as mice. Caulk any openings larger than the size of a dime.
- You can use items such as chimney caps, window screens, or draft-guards beneath doors to help exclude bats.
- If you spot any electrical or plumbing holes, seal these with steel wool, caulk, or other material that is rated for pest exclusion.
- Make sure all exterior doors are capable of being tightly closed.
- If you have bats in your home or dwelling, observe where they exit and enter. Once you've discovered their exit-point, use loosely hung plastic sheeting or bird nets (see image). This will allow bats to climb out but they will not be able to re-enter.
- Be aware that the number of bat sightings can increase during the bat-proofing period, as some bats may seek alternate means of entry/exit. Make your housemates aware of this possibility and be prepared to take action if you make contact with a bat.



REFERENCES

CDC Bats and Rabies Factsheet - [cdc.gov/rabies/animals/bats/index.html](https://www.cdc.gov/rabies/animals/bats/index.html)

Bats and Camping Environments Factsheet - [cdc.gov/rabies/pdf/BATS_Final_508.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/rabies/pdf/BATS_Final_508.pdf)

Bat Conservation International - batcon.org/about-bats/bats-in-homes-buildings/

MDPH – [Rabies information for the general public | Mass.gov](https://www.mass.gov/info-details/rabies-information-for-the-general-public)