The very early warm weather this year has insects out early which promotes bats to become active earlier. Please note the very prudent advice from our public health colleagues in Illinois. I thank them for sharing their well crafted message with us.

John Poe

SPRINGFIELD – With temperatures in Illinois already in the 70s and 80s this year, bats are becoming active, which means the possibility of exposure to rabies is increasing. Bats are the primary carrier of rabies in Illinois. The Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) has already had one bat test positive for rabies, and two people are undergoing post-exposure treatment after coming into contact with that rabid bat.

“Bats are already active this year due to the early, warm temperatures,” said Dr. Connie Austin, state public health veterinarian. “It’s important to remember that you should never try to approach or catch a bat, or any wild animal, you find outside. Instead, call your local animal control agency for its recommendations.”

In 2011, 49 bats and one cow tested positive for rabies in Illinois. Any wild mammal, such as a skunk, fox, coyote, raccoon or bat can have rabies and transmit it to humans.

Rabies is a virus that affects the nervous system of humans and other mammals. Humans can get rabies after being bitten by an infected animal. Rabies can also be contracted when saliva from a rabid animal gets directly into a person’s eyes, nose, mouth or a wound. People usually know when they have been bitten by a bat, but bats have very small teeth and the bite mark may not be easy to see. If you find yourself in close proximity to a bat and are not sure if you were exposed, for example – you wake up and find a bat in your room, do not kill or release the bat before calling your doctor or local health department to help determine if you could have been exposed to rabies and need preventive treatment.

Without preventive treatment, rabies is a fatal disease. If you have been bitten or have had direct contact with a bat, seek immediate medical attention. Treatment with rabies immune globulin and a vaccine series must begin immediately.

An animal does not have to be aggressive or exhibit other symptoms to have rabies. Changes in any animal’s normal behavior, such as difficulty walking or an overall appearance of illness, can be early signs of rabies. For example, skunks are normally nocturnal and avoid contact with people, but a rabid skunk may approach humans during daylight hours. A bat that is active during the day, found on the ground or is unable to fly, is more likely than others to be rabid. Such bats are often easily approached, but should never be handled.

The following tips can help prevent the spread of rabies:

* Be a responsible animal owner. Keep vaccinations up-to-date for all dogs, cats, ferrets and other animals you own.
* Seek immediate veterinary assistance for your pet if your pet is bitten by a wild animal or exposed to a bat.

* Call the local animal control agency about removing stray animals in your neighborhood.

* Do not handle, feed or unintentionally attract wild animals with open garbage cans or litter.

* Never adopt wild animals or bring them into your home. Do not try to nurse sick, wild animals to health. Call animal control or an animal rescue agency for assistance.

* Teach children never to handle unfamiliar animals, wild or domestic, even if they appear friendly. “Love your own, leave other animals alone” is a good principle for children to learn to reduce the risk of exposures to rabid animals.

* Maintain homes and other buildings so bats cannot gain entry.

· If a bat is in your home, do not release the bat outdoors until after speaking with animal control or public health officials. If you can do it without putting yourself at risk for physical contact or being bitten, try to cover the bat with a large can or bucket, and close the door to the room.

Information about keeping bats out of your home or buildings can be found by logging on to [www.idph.state.il.us/envhealth/pcbats.htm](http://www.idph.state.il.us/envhealth/pcbats.htm).

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