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HANDS OFF! AVOIDING CONTACT WITH BATS

Be Sure That Rabies Vaccinations for Pets are Up-To-Date

Each year, the Northeast Tri-County Health District (NETCHD) responds to several reports about animal bites and exposures to bats. Most of these exposures occur during summer when bats are active, and people are spending more time outdoors. While bats are a vitally important part of our ecosystem, it's important that people take precautions around them because of the risk of rabies. Avoiding contact with bats and other wild animals, and vaccinating your pets are the best ways to protect you and your family from getting rabies.

Rabies is a viral disease that attacks the central nervous system in mammals. Death usually occurs days after 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. On rare occasions, rabies may be spread to open wounds or mucous membranes by an infected animal's saliva.

In Washington, bats are the animal of most concern for rabies. Although it's estimated that less than one percent of the bat population is infected with rabies, about seven percent of those submitted for testing in the past 20 years were rabid. So far this year, one bat tested from the area has tested positive for rabies.

Bats can be found throughout the state; they are not aggressive animals and most of them don't have rabies. Those seen flying at dusk and feeding on insects are usually healthy and will avoid close contact with people. However, any 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.

The best way to prevent exposures is to keep bats from entering your living space. Bats can squeeze through half-inch openings and typically enter homes through un-screened windows, chimneys, and near roof edges. NETCHD can provide helpful information to homeowners on effective ways to exclude bats from entering homes.

If you find a bat in the house and there was contact with the bat or even if there was a chance of contact, close the doors and windows to the room; wear leather or other thick gloves; capture the bat in a can or box without touching it; seal the container; and call NETCHD. NETCHD will help you determine if any people in your home may have been exposed and can arrange to test the bat for rabies.

If there is *absolute* certainty that contact with the bat did not occur, the bat can be assisted in exiting the building by opening an exterior door or window, turning off lights, and patiently waiting until the bat finds its way outside.

Dogs and cats can also get rabies, so keep their vaccinations up-to-date. Call a veterinarian if your pet has had contact with a wild animal. If you are bitten by an animal — wild or domestic — wash the wound well and call your doctor and NETCHD immediately.

Northeast Tri County Health District Offices:

- Colville – Stevens County: 509-684-2262
- Newport – Pend Oreille County: 509-447-3131
- Republic – Ferry County: 509-775-3111
- Website: netchd.org

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