

## MHO UPDATE FOR COMMUNITY PROVIDERS

July 18, 2019

### In this Issue:

- Rabies and Animal Exposures

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### Medical Health Officers:

Dr. Trevor Corneil

Dr. Kamran Golmohammadi

Dr. Silvina Mema

Dr. Sue Pollock

Dr. Karin Goodison

### CONTACT INFO:

Duty MHO line (24/7)  
1-866-457-5648

### Rabies and Animal Exposures

Earlier this week a fatal case of rabies in a human was confirmed in BC. This is a rare and tragic event that followed direct contact with a bat. Despite many human interactions with bats, only two cases of rabies have occurred in BC since 1924. This case has increased public awareness of the risk of rabies, and many individuals are now seeking care for animal exposures.

In humans, rabies infection is nearly always fatal. When started promptly, post-exposure prophylaxis with rabies immunoglobulin and vaccine is nearly 100% effective at preventing disease.

#### Assessment of An Animal Contact

If a client presents with a possible animal contact refer them to Public Health for a risk assessment:

- During regular business hours (M-F 8:30 am – 4:30 pm) refer the client to their local community health centre. <https://bit.ly/2JFbHtS>
- On weekends and evenings contact the MHO on call for a risk assessment at 1-866-457-5648

*Only the MHO can authorize the release rabies immunoglobulin and vaccine for post-exposure prophylaxis*

#### Species & Geography

Rabies is a viral infection that affects mammals. In BC, bats are the only animal that carry rabies. Less than 1% of bats in BC carry rabies, however 13% of bats submitted for testing after human contact were found to be infected. Contact with other animals in BC, including dogs, cats, and racoons do not pose a risk unless the animal is infected. All mammalian animal exposure that have occurred outside of BC, need to be assessed individually for risk of rabies and the need for post-exposure prophylaxis.

The risk of rabies from animal contacts depends on:

- The species of the animal
- The geographic location of the contact (i.e. whether in BC, other provinces, or abroad)
- The type of contact (i.e. a bite or scratch)
- The availability of the animal for rabies testing
- The general health & behavior of the animal, including vaccination status for pets

**Type of Contact & Rabies Transmission**

Humans can contract rabies from percutaneous or mucous membrane exposures to the saliva or neural tissue/fluid of any infected animal. Typically this occurs through scratches or bites. When considering bat exposures, it is important to note that the claws and teeth of some bat species are so small that percutaneous exposure can occur without a visible wound. For this reason, we treat all direct contact with a bat as a high-risk exposure.

**Assessment of the Animal**

When exposure has occurred to a domestic animal and the animal is available, its health can be assessed by a veterinarian. In some instances it may be possible to observe the animal or euthanize it and submit it for rabies testing; this may enable patients to avoid unnecessary prophylaxis. In cases where pets have been vaccinated against rabies, they will pose no risk.

**General Advice**

To prevent exposure, we advise that people avoid contact with bats, and with any mammal when traveling, especially in developing countries. Travelers can also purchase a rabies vaccine series prior to travel to high-risk areas through travel clinics.

If a bite or a scratch does occur, advise your patients to wash the wound and seek immediate medical attention. Immediate washing of the wound is the most effective intervention to prevent rabies.

**Resources**

IH Bats and Rabies Information Page:

<https://www.interiorhealth.ca/YourEnvironment/CommunicableDiseaseControl/Pages/Bats.aspx>

BC Centre for Disease Control Guidelines:

<https://bit.ly/2JCUIZs>