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Increase in rabid bats in LA County prompts health concerns

Avoid contact with bats; keep your pets' rabies vaccine up-to-date

LOS ANGELES – A record-high of 45 rabid bats have been confirmed in Los Angeles County this year. The Department of Public Health is reminding all residents to avoid touching any bats or wild animals. Previously, the highest number of rabid bats seen in the county was 38 in 2011.

“The reason for the increase in rabid bats is unclear. Regardless, it is important that everyone understand the potential dangers posed to themselves and their pets as most of these rabid bats have been found in and around homes,” said Jonathan E. Fielding, MD, MPH, Director of Public Health and Health Officer. “Children and teens especially should avoid handling bats or other wildlife, even if their intentions are to nurse an injured or ill animal back to health. If a bat is found near a home, a school, or another area frequented by people or pets it must be reported to the local animal control agency so rabies testing of the bat can be arranged.”

Since the beginning of 2012, several individuals and pets in various parts of the county have encountered rabid bats in public areas, in their front or back yards, and, occasionally, inside their homes. It is unusual to see bats on the ground or flying during daylight hours as healthy bats tend to stay away from humans. Individuals exposed to any bat or wildlife should seek immediate medical attention. A bite from a bat can be difficult to see on the skin, or on a pet, as bats have very small, very sharp teeth. Infection with the rabies virus can ultimately cause disease in the brain and death.

“Thankfully, we have very effective post-exposure treatment and vaccine, which means there has not been a locally-acquired case of human rabies in Los Angeles County in over 50 years. Exposure to rabies is not contagious; people cannot transmit rabies to other people unless they themselves are sick with rabies,” said Dr. Fielding.

On average there are usually only 10 positive rabid bats discovered per year. The majority of bats do not carry rabies and these animals play an important environmental role by feeding on insects and controlling insect populations. Bat colonies found in a home’s attic, a commercial building, or other non-living space are protected by federal law and can only be removed by humane exclusion (release), and not by extermination. For more information about bat exclusions, visit <http://www.batcon.org/index.php/bats-a-people/bats-in-buildings.html>.

To reduce your risk of rabies:

- Make sure all pets are up-to-date on their rabies vaccinations. Unvaccinated dogs and cats exposed to rabid bats may need to be euthanized or may need to undergo a six-month quarantine at the owner’s expense.
- If you think you have been bitten by a bat or other wild animal, immediately wash the bite area with soap and water, and contact your doctor or health care provider to determine if you need post-exposure treatment. If possible, safely contain the animal and



contact the local animal control agency to arrange for rabies observation and quarantine of the animal or rabies testing.

- If you find a bat on the ground near your home or in an area frequented by people and pets, do not attempt to touch the bat or capture it with your hands. Cover it with a bucket or box, keep children and pets away from the animal, and contact the local animal control agency.
- If a bat found inside a home may have had access to pets or areas where people were sleeping, do not release it outside; if possible put a small box or container over it. Contact the local animal control agency.

For more information about rabies and rabid bats, visit the department's Veterinary Public Health webpage at <http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/vet/rabiesmap2012.htm>.

The Department of Public Health is committed to protecting and improving the health of the nearly 10 million residents of Los Angeles County. Through a variety of programs, community partnerships and services, Public Health oversees environmental health, disease control, and community and family health. Public Health comprises nearly 4,000 employees and has an annual budget exceeding \$750 million. To learn more about Public Health and the work we do please visit <http://www.publichealth.lacounty.gov>, visit our YouTube channel at <http://www.youtube.com/lapublichealth>, find us on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/lapublichealth>, or follow us on Twitter: LAPublicHealth.

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