



Central Office: 505 Silas Deane Highway, Wethersfield, CT 06109 Phone (860) 721-2822 Fax (860) 721-2823

Berlin: 240 Kensington Road, Berlin, CT 06037 Phone (860) 828-7017 Fax (860) 828-9248

Newington: 131 Cedar Street, Newington, CT 06111 Phone (860) 665-8586 Fax (860) 665-8533

Rocky Hill: 761 Old Main Street, Rocky Hill, CT 06067 Phone (860) 258-2770 Fax (860) 258-2767

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Rabid Bats Found in Area – Help Prevent Rabies

During the month of July, two bats collected within the boundaries of the Central Connecticut Health District tested positive for rabies. One rabid bat was found in Berlin, and the other in Newington. No human cases have occurred. It is important to remember that any mammal can get rabies, whether wild or domesticated. In the United States, the most common wild animals that carry rabies are raccoons, skunks, bats, foxes, and coyotes. However, cats, dogs, and cattle also are susceptible to the virus.

Rabies is a disease that attacks the nervous system. It is usually transmitted through the saliva of an infected animal into an open wound or the mucous membranes of the eyes or mouth of an uninfected person or animal. The most common mode of transmission of the rabies virus to people is through the bite of an infected animal. Handling a rabid animal, or coming into contact with its blood, urine, or feces, does not result in transmission of the disease. No medical treatment is required. Any infected material from the host becomes noninfectious when it is exposed to the sunlight and dries out.

If a person is bitten by a rabid animal, it is urgent to get medical attention as soon as possible. Untreated rabies progresses through several stages, ultimately ending in death. When a person is exposed to rabies, the virus will incubate for weeks or months. After incubation, early symptoms often resemble the flu -- general weakness or discomfort, fever, or headache may last for days.

As rabies progresses from the early to the acute stage, itching or a prickly feeling around the wound may occur, followed by anxiety, confusion, and agitation. This stage typically lasts from 2 to 10 days. Once these symptoms occur, the infected person is likely to experience confusion, delirium, hallucinations, and insomnia. Slight or partial paralysis may be evident, and there may be an increase in the production of saliva, difficulty swallowing, and fear of water. Behavior is decidedly abnormal, and survival at this point is rare. Death usually occurs within days of the onset of these symptoms.

Fortunately, rabies in humans is 100% preventable through prompt treatment and prophylaxis. In the U.S., the number of rabies-related human deaths is 1 or 2 per year, according to the CDC. When a rabid animal bites, medical care is required *before* symptoms develop to prevent rabies. That care includes a thorough cleaning of the wound, followed by a series of injections. In the United States, the shots consist of one dose of immune globulin and four doses of rabies vaccine over a 14-day period, beginning as soon as possible after exposure. Current vaccines are relatively painless and are given in your arm, like a tetanus vaccine.

Although exposure to rabies is highly treatable if care is obtained promptly, preventing infection in the first place certainly is preferable. If you notice a stray animal in your neighborhood, contact your local animal control officer and request its removal. Pet owners should take their animals for regular veterinary appointments and keep their rabies shots up to date. Keeping cats and ferrets indoors and supervising dogs when they are outside will reduce the likelihood of a pet's exposure to rabid wild animals. Watch out for strange behavior in animals. Signs of possible rabies infection in both wild and domesticated animals include:

- shyness of a normally friendly pet
- fearlessness (of humans) in wild animals
- uncharacteristic excitability, aggressiveness, or restlessness

- sudden mood changes
- excessive drooling
- abnormal activity during the time of day the animal is usually inactive
- eating substances that are not normally eaten, and
- paralysis

If any of these signs are present, contact the local animal control officer or the police. To learn more about rabies in both humans and animals, contact the Centers for Disease Control at 1-800- CDC-INFO (1-800-232-4636), or visit www.cdc.gov/rabies. For further information about this or other public health concerns, contact the Central Connecticut Health District (serving Berlin, Newington, Rocky Hill, and Wethersfield) at 860-721-2822 (www.ccthd.org).