

Animal Health Advisory: Human rabies death from a bat in California
12.10.2024

Key Points:

- A Fresno County resident has died from rabies after being bitten by a presumably rabid bat in Merced County.
- Bats continue to be the primary reservoir species for rabies in Los Angeles County. Rabid bats are found every year throughout LA County, and sometimes found indoors.
- Any bat that could have bitten or had possible contact with a person or pet should not be discarded or released. The local animal control agency should be contacted immediately to arrange for rabies testing on the bat.
- Veterinary staff should familiarize themselves and clients on what to do if a bat is found. Pets should be kept up to date on rabies vaccinations, even if they are not allowed outdoors.

Dear Veterinary Colleagues:

In the last week of November 2024, it was reported that a woman in Fresno County died after being bitten by a presumably rabid bat in Merced County approximately one month earlier. The patient was hospitalized in a Fresno County hospital after developing clinical signs in mid-November. The Fresno County Department of Public Health (FCDPH) and the Merced County Department of Public Health (MCDPH) worked with the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to investigate this case, and evidence of rabies was confirmed by the state's Viral and Rickettsial Disease Laboratory (VRDL).

Many local bat species are small and can inflict tiny bites that heal quickly. Such small bites can still transmit rabies. Therefore, never assume that the lack of a visible bite wound rules out a bat bite. Human deaths from rabies are rare in the United States, with fewer than 10 cases identified each year. Prior to this patient, the last human death from rabies in California occurred in 2012 and was associated with a bat variant. Bats continue to be the main rabies reservoir species across the state, including in Los Angeles (LA) County. LA County has also reported the highest number of rabid bats every year for over the last decade compared to other counties in California.

In 2024, there have been 49 rabid bats detected in LA County so far. The majority of these bats were found alive (73%) and at private residences (88%). Three rabid bats were found at schools. Three rabid bats were found indoors. While only a small percentage (~1%) of bats in nature have rabies, up to 20% of the bats reported to, and tested, by LA County Public Health have been positive for rabies. Bats are considered protected wildlife and play a vital role in the

ecosystem by eating insects, pollinating plants, and spreading seeds. It is illegal to keep, injure, or kill bats.

It is crucial that any bats found indoors in a home, or in areas where people or pets could have had contact or were sleeping, are not discarded or released. This includes bats that could have been around children or individuals with disabilities. Any bat in this scenario should be reported to the local animal control agency so the bat can be retrieved and tested for rabies. Call 211 to find your local animal control agency. Exposure risk to people and pets can be ruled out if the bat tests negative for rabies. Rabies testing of the bat is performed at no cost to the resident. If the bat is released or discarded, the opportunity to test it is lost, and Public Health will proceed with risk assessment as if the bat was rabid.

Each year, tens of thousands of people in the US receive preventive treatment for rabies following a bite or other direct contact with an animal with possible rabies. People who had potential exposure to either a confirmed rabid bat, or a bat that was not tested, are advised to receive rabies post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP). Rabies PEP for people who have never been vaccinated before consists of a series of four rabies vaccinations given over 2 weeks, plus one dose of human rabies immune globulin (HRIG) given during the first week. People who are already vaccinated for rabies also need rabies PEP after a rabies exposure, but it is simpler, consisting only of two rabies vaccines given three days apart. Pets who may have been exposed to rabies need to be vaccinated or re-vaccinated for rabies and placed under quarantine.

Veterinarians are advised to take the following actions:

- All dogs and cats (including indoor-only pets) should be kept up-to-date on rabies vaccinations.
- All pet encounters with bats should be reported to Veterinary Public Health. Bat bites are tiny and often leave no lasting mark. Therefore, if the pet had any potential direct or unsupervised access to a bat, it should be reported as a potential bite. Bites from other wildlife (e.g. raccoons, coyotes, skunks, opossums) should be reported to Veterinary Public Health as well. Bite reporting forms can be found on our Veterinary Public Health website [here](#).
- Pet owners and staff should be advised not to handle or try to rehabilitate sick bats.
- If a resident brings a bat, alive or dead, into your clinic, be sure to collect their name and contact information in case the bat later tests positive for rabies. Then contact your local animal control agency to come pick up the bat.
- Pet owners should be advised to not release a bat if it is found indoors, because it may have bitten sleeping people and pets while indoors and exposed them to rabies. It needs to be tested for rabies. They should call the local animal control agency to arrange pick-up of the bat. Call 211 to find your local animal control agency.
- Please post and share this handout: [What To Do If You Find A Bat](#).

Veterinarians and animal health workers are encouraged to contact us with any questions by

email: vet@ph.lacounty.gov, or by phone: 213-288-7060 (Monday-Friday, 8am-5pm). Please visit our VPH webpage for more information about bats and rabies (links provided below).

Resources:

- Handout: What To Do If You Find A Bat:
<http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/vet/images/RabiesOutreach/WhatToDoIfYouFindABatColorPrint.pdf>
- 2024 Los Angeles County Rabid Bat Information:
<http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/vet/rabiesmap2024.htm>
- Bats in Los Angeles County: <http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/vet/bats.htm>
- California Department of Public Health (CDPH) – Reminder of Rabies Precautions:
<https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/OPA/Pages/NR24-040.aspx>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) – Preventing Rabies from Bats:
<https://www.cdc.gov/rabies/prevention/bats.html>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) – Rabies in the United States
<https://www.cdc.gov/rabies/php/protecting-public-health>

Sincerely,

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Please email vet@ph.lacounty.gov if you wish to unsubscribe or need other AHAN-related assistance. To sign up for future Animal Health Alerts or to view previously released AHANs, please visit <http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/vet/AHAN.htm>.