



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts  
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Department of Public Health  
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MEMORANDUM

TO: Local Boards of Health

FROM: Catherine Brown, D.V.M., M.Sc., M.P.H.  
State Public Health Veterinarian  
Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH)

DATE: July 29, 2009

SUBJECT: Bats and Rabies

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As you may already be aware, calls to public health agencies regarding bats and potential exposures to bats, are on the rise at this time of year. This is because attics are the place in a house where bats usually choose to roost and raise their young. After a few hot summer days, an attic can become too warm for the bats, forcing them into people's living quarters as they search for cooler places to roost. In addition, baby bats born earlier in the summer are getting old enough to start exploring on their own. Inexperienced young bats may fly down a chimney, through an open window, or down attic stairs. This may place them in proximity to or even in direct contact with, people.

Below are several important points to keep in mind when handling calls regarding bats.

- If a bat is found inside a house, **do not release the bat outdoors until you can safely rule out that an exposure, as described below, occurred.**
- The teeth and claws of bats are so small that a bite or scratch may leave only a very small mark and the wound may not bleed or hurt. This means that under certain conditions, a person may not realize that an exposure has occurred. These conditions include, for example: a sleeping person awaking to find a bat in the room; or an adult witnessing a bat in the room with a previously unattended child, mentally disabled person, or intoxicated person.

- If a bat is present inside a house or building and you cannot rule out that a person may have been bitten, scratched, or had a mucous membrane exposure to the bat, MDPH recommends that the bat be submitted for testing. If the bat is found to be rabid, or the bat is unavailable for testing, post exposure prophylaxis (PEP) should be considered.
- Owners are legally required to keep their pet dogs and cats up-to-date on their rabies vaccinations. Currently vaccinated dogs and cats exposed to bats that are unavailable for testing, may need to receive a booster shot and/or be quarantined. Unvaccinated animals exposed to bats unavailable for testing pose a significant risk to other animals and people and may need to be quarantined for a prolonged period or occasionally even euthanized, at the owner's expense. Questions about domestic animals exposed to bats should be directed to the Department of Agricultural Resources, Division of Animal Health at 617-626-1786.
- When necessary, bats should be safely captured using the following technique and while wearing thick leather gloves. Wait until the bat lands, cover the bat with a coffee can (or similar container), and slide cardboard under the container to trap the bat inside. Avoid doing anything that might crush the bat's skull and make it unsuitable for testing. **Never handle a bat with bare hands.**

**If you have questions about potential rabies exposures or how to submit a bat to MDPH for rabies testing, please call the MDPH, Division of Epidemiology and Immunization at (617) 983-6800.** For additional information on rabies, you may also visit the MDPH epidemiology program website at [www.mass.gov/dph/epi](http://www.mass.gov/dph/epi) and click on "Rabies".