

## Rabies and Animal Exposures

A fatal case of rabies in BC has been confirmed. This is a rare and tragic event that followed direct contact with a bat. Despite many human interactions with bats, only three 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 100% effective at preventing disease. The risk from rabies should be considered whenever you assess animal contact. This risk 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

### Species & Geography

Rabies is a viral infection that affects mammals. In BC, bats are the only animal that carry rabies. It is likely that 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 and do not require post exposure prophylaxis. However, all mammalian animal exposures that occur outside of BC need to be assessed individually for risk of rabies and the need for post-exposure prophylaxis.

### Type of Contact & Rabies Transmission

Humans can contract rabies from percutaneous or mucous membrane exposures to the saliva or neural tissue/fluid of an infected animal. Typically, this occurs through scratches or bites. However, 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

If exposure to a bat occurs and it is available for testing, this can be arranged by public health. Testing of other animals is rarely required in BC. However, veterinary assessment of animals can sometimes enable patients to avoid unnecessary prophylaxis.

### General Advice

To prevent exposure, we advise that people avoid contact with bats, dead or alive. Never touch a bat with bare hands. Travelers, especially in developing countries, should avoid contact with all mammals. Travelers to high risk areas can also purchase a rabies vaccine series at the VCH Travel Clinic (604-736-9244 for appointment). If a bite or a scratch does occur, advise your patients to wash the wound immediately and seek immediate medical attention. A healthfile with greater detail is available here: <https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthlinkbc-files/rabies>

**If a patient presents with a history of contact with a bat in BC, or a scratch/bite from another mammal outside of BC, please call Vancouver Coastal Public Health at 604-675-3900 to assess the need for vaccination (after hours 604-527-4893).**

You can reach a Medical Health Officer in Vancouver at 604.675.3900 Toll free at 1.855.675.3900  
For public health emergencies after hours contact the Medical Health Officer on call at 604.527.4893

Vancouver Medical Health Officers

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