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MEDICAL HEALTH OFFICERS' NEWSLETTER No. 307

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RABIES

A fatal case of rabies in BC has been confirmed this month. This is a rare and tragic event that followed direct contact with a bat. Despite many human interactions with bats, only two previous 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, rabies post-exposure prophylaxis (RPEP) is nearly 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. 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, rodents, rabbits and raccoons do not pose a risk. All mammalian animal exposures that have occurred 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 recommend assessment of all direct contact exposures with a bat.

Pets who have been in direct contact with bats should be assessed by their veterinarian.

General Prevention Advice

To prevent exposure, we advise that people avoid contact with all bats, and with any mammal when traveling, especially in developing countries. Children should be educated about not handling wildlife, and when to seek help about potential exposures. Household pets should be kept up to date with rabies vaccinations.

Travelers can also purchase a rabies vaccine series prior to travel to high-risk areas at a travel clinic.

If a bite or a scratch does occur, advise your patients to wash the wound and seek medical attention promptly. Immediate washing of the wound is the most effective intervention to prevent rabies.

If a patient presents with a history of contact with a bat in BC, or a bite from another mammal outside of BC, please call your local Communicable Disease unit to assess the need for rabies post exposure prophylaxis (RPEP) (after “business” hours, call the on-call MHO- see below).

Consultation with the CD Unit/MHO should occur prior to any decision to provide RPEP. Release of rabies vaccine and rabies immune globulin for post exposure prophylaxis must be authorized by an MHO, including at hospital pharmacies and public health units.

If a bat involved in human contact has been captured, it may be submitted for testing. However, any attempts to retrieve a live bat should only be conducted with protective equipment to avoid further direct contact. Contact the Communicable Disease unit or MHO to arrange for testing of bat specimens.

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Yours in Health,



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