

PUBLIC HEALTH INSIDER

OFFICIAL INSIGHTS FROM PUBLIC HEALTH – SEATTLE & KING COUNTY STAFF

Hey, what's up with bats?

Meredith Li-Vollmer animals, Communicable Disease, Zoonotic Disease bats, king county, rabies,

Vance Kawakami 1 Comment

Three rabid bats have been found in public areas within King County since August 19 and an additional two rabid bats were found in 2017 that had no exposure to the public. I sat down with Vance Kawakami, DVM MPH, one of our public health veterinarians and an epidemiologist, to find out what is going on with bats lately.



I think many people are wondering why we're suddenly getting these rabid bats in King County. Is there anything different going on?

Over the years, we occasionally see a rabid bat in a park, but it's unusual to have three found in public spaces in a relatively short time. So that makes it seem like something's going on. But rabid bats are not new—every year we do rabies testings on bats that have had contact with people. The number of bats brought in for testing has been about the same this year. So far, a higher percentage of those bats have tested positive for rabies. Since 2012, the percentage of bats testing positive each year has ranged from

0-8%. As of August 31, 16% of the bats tested positive for the rabies virus. However, the total number of positive bats this year is 5 out of 31 so far and in the past year it was 3 out of 33. These are very small numbers, so even that small increase in the number of positive tests can make the percentage this year appear much larger, even if the number of bats hasn't risen substantially.

However, we know that the number of bats that test positive for rabies can change from year to year and a one-year increase might not indicate that there's actually more rabies in local bats. It's too early to tell if this is a significant increase because we typically get more bats for testing from June through September, so that may be artificially inflating the percentage of bats that test positive for rabies. We'll know more once we've tested more bats through the rest of the year.

The ecology of bats is complicated and there could be a number of explanations for what we're seeing. For instance, there may be an increase in the bat population in general, or more people may be aware of the risk of bats from previous notifications, so that could lead to more testing and more identified cases. Or, it could be that there is a true increase in rabies among bats. That's why we're doing more investigation. We're reaching out to experts in the ecology and biology of bats at [Fish and Wildlife \(http://wdfw.wa.gov/\)](http://wdfw.wa.gov/) and to the [Washington State Department of Health \(http://www.doh.wa.gov/\)](http://www.doh.wa.gov/) to provide the data and context that will help us get a clearer picture.

What's most important for people to know if they come across a bat?

Anyone who touched or had contact with the bat or its saliva could be at risk of getting rabies, which is almost always fatal once symptoms begin. Fortunately, rabies can be prevented if treatment is given before [symptoms \(https://www.cdc.gov/rabies/symptoms/index.html\)](https://www.cdc.gov/rabies/symptoms/index.html) appear, so identifying anyone who has had contact early is important. If you think you or your children or pets may have touched or picked up a bat, call Public Health immediately at 206-296-4774.

If you think you or your pet has been exposed, it's also very important to try to capture the bat if possible so that it can be tested for rabies. Testing can confirm whether treatment is necessary to prevent rabies.

Capturing a bat sounds a little daunting, to say the least. How do you do it?

If you find a dead bat in a public place, call Public Health at 206-296-4774 or your city's animal control office. If you find a dead bat on your property, use heavy gloves (like leather work gloves), then pick it up or scoop it up with dust pan and put it in sealed container or jar, or place it in a plastic bag that is within another heavy-weight plastic bag such as a zip-lock bag. Store it in a cooler or refrigerator until you have notified Public Health.

If you have a live bat in your home, wear heavy gloves and wait for it to land. Then put an empty container (like a shoebox or plastic food container) or wastebasket over it and slide a piece of cardboard underneath to contain it. If you can, get the container lid on it and tape it down. Punch small holes in the container so the bat can breathe and keep it in an area away from people as much as possible. Don't refrigerate, freeze or kill a live bat! *[See the video below for more details and a demonstration.]*

And if you need help, you can contact an agency that is experienced and understands the public health issues related to live bats. *[See suggested agencies under "What is the best way to capture a bat" on our [Bats and Rabies website \(http://www.kingcounty.gov/depts/health/communicable-diseases/health-care-providers/rabies-assessment/bats.aspx\)](http://www.kingcounty.gov/depts/health/communicable-diseases/health-care-providers/rabies-assessment/bats.aspx).]*

Are there ways you can tell if a bat has rabies?

It's not normal for a bat to come into contact with people since they're usually active at night. If you see a bat during the day and it's acting strangely—like it's struggling to fly or lying on the ground—it could potentially be infected with rabies. Leave that bat alone!

How can I protect my dog or cat from contact with bats?

Vaccinate your pets to protect them against rabies. In King County, all dogs, cats and ferrets are required to have rabies vaccinations by the time they are four months of age and a year later. Depending on the brand of vaccine used, dog and cat rabies vaccinations may be good for either one or three years. Also, keep your pets on leashes in public spaces so that you can keep them away from sick wildlife.

If I think my pet has touched a bat, what do I do?

Contact your veterinarian right away. Even if your pet is up-to-date on their rabies vaccine, your pet should get an additional rabies vaccine for further protection.

Can bats infect other wildlife?

Yes. In Washington State, the only animal that is a known natural source for the rabies virus is bats, but numerous other mammal species such as raccoons may be able to acquire and spread the virus from bats. However, this appears rare in Washington State. Between 1989-2015, over 850 wild animals were tested for rabies in Washington and they all tested negative for the rabies virus.

Are there ways that I can avoid bats?

Bats commonly roost around the outside of houses and buildings, so the most effective way to avoid unwanted encounters is by bat-proofing (<http://www.batsnorthwest.org/exclusion.html>) your home and property. Also, make sure to tell your kids that if they see bats—or any wildlife—they should not touch or approach them.

That said, I also want to say a good word about bats, especially since the vast majority does not have rabies. Bats in Washington State feed primarily on insects and play an important role in our ecology and agricultural industry. So it's good that we have bats around, we just need to be careful not to touch them.

For more information about recent possible bat exposures:

- [Rabid bat found at City of SeaTac Park \(August 30, 2017\)](http://kingcounty.gov/depts/health/news/2017/August/30-rabid-bat.aspx)
- [Rabid bat found in Ballard neighborhood \(August 24, 2017\)](http://kingcounty.gov/depts/health/news/2017/August/30-rabid-bat.aspx)
- [Rabid bat found at Green Lake Park \(August 19, 2017\)](http://kingcounty.gov/depts/health/news/2017/August/19-rabid-bat.aspx)

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Posted by Meredith Li-Vollmer

I am a risk communications specialist at Public Health - Seattle & King County.

One thought on “Hey, what’s up with bats?”

1.

LAWRENCE MCDONALD

says:

August 31, 2017 at 11:53 pm

I found a live bat a week ago moving slowly on the bark in front of my house. Lake Roesiger, Snohomish County.!!

REPLY

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