

## Beware of Bats 07-27-18

Some public health messages are ongoing and numerous, making it challenging to garner the public's attention. Other concerns are annual and seasonal, giving us a break and then returning. Being aware of the potential for bats to spread the deadly rabies virus is one of those annual concerns. Just because we've talked about it before, does not mean that everyone knows. There will always be the people who are new to the area or are of the young adult population enjoying their freedom and a place of their own. "And just suppose.." as Jim Carey's Fire Marshall character used to say on his Saturday Night Live skits, just suppose they were not taught that bats might live in their attic and that very particular steps need to be taken if bitten by a bat.

So here we go. Let's suppose you wake up and find a bat in your room. Or, you enter a room with an infant or any person who cannot fluently describe a situation, such as someone who is intoxicated or mentally challenged. All of those situations require action. Do not let the bat out. (That is what lots of people do. It's only natural. We all want to get rid of the unwanted, scary things in life. Sometimes we talk to a therapist; other times we open the windows and say, "Shoo!")

If we cannot be absolutely certain that a person has not had contact with the bat, we need to safely catch it for testing or the person needs to receive the prophylactic series of shots to prevent rabies. Rabies is death sentence once contracted. It cannot be treated, only prevented. Well, there is one case many years ago of a girl who supposedly had rabies and lived to tell the story, but that recovery has never been replicated.

The main reason we must be so careful with bats and we stress the necessity of submitting it for testing is that their teeth are so tiny, we may not even notice the mark of a bite. Seriously. This is not messy vampire slayer folklore.

Did you notice how I said the bat needs to be submitted for testing but jumped right over the part of how we would accomplish this? That is because I feel uncomfortable telling you how to catch a bat. Here is the official method: "Don some heavy gloves, wait for the bat to land and then place something such as a coffee can over the bat. Slide a piece of cardboard or sheet of plastic under the can and keep the bat contained." I feel uncomfortable telling you that this animal is potentially deadly, but you can go up real close to it and catch it in a can. If you feel confident doing that, go right ahead. I think it is a better idea to call a wildlife expert to catch it.

If the bat can be safely caught, send it to DPH's State lab for testing. Wouldn't it be a great relief to know, with certainty, that you were not exposed to rabies? If the bat cannot be caught and if someone was with the bat while asleep or impaired, then seek medical advice and discuss with your doctor the preventative series of shots.

Last summer, about this time of year, I received a call from a woman who had woken up to the sight of a bat in her bedroom. Doing what seemed right at the time, she opened her bedroom window and left the room, with a towel rolled up at the bottom of the door and slept elsewhere for the remainder of that night. She was pleased to find the bat gone the next day. A few days later, she came across the local newspaper and read my annual story of bats and rabies. She was stunned as she recognized herself in the column. Her concerns were confirmed when she called her doctor and was told to get right in there for the series of shots. The woman took the time to call and tell me her

story. She began by saying, “You might have saved my life.” It was very humbling to hear that. I was grateful for the guidance I receive from the experts all year long.

This is all a part of living with nature. We can do this. If we are aware of how the animals operate, we can take informed measures that will allow us to share the planet with them but also to leave them alone. When it comes to young bats, it is good to know that by the time August arrives, our attics are too hot for them and the young bats are beginning to venture out on their own. They make mistakes. They dip into doorways and fly down chimneys, as though they were cave openings. So, keep your screens in good order and keep those chimney flues closed and maybe we won’t have to worry about bats at all, except for those in our metaphorical belfries. In any case, I will be happy to repeat this information again next summer. For now, let’s try to be safe and be sane.

*Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for the Town of Halifax. She welcomes your comments and suggestions. She can be reached at 781 292 6768 or [cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us](mailto:cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us)*