

8-23-13 Bugs and Bats on the Wing (part I)

This year certainly and, thankfully, has been quieter than the last two when it comes to mosquito borne disease. At this point, there isn't the need for an aerial spraying looming over us, in response to numerous positive results for Eastern Equine Encephalitis (EEE) everywhere. It is out there, though, along with its well travelled and well fed cousin, West Nile virus (WNV).

Another creature venturing out at this time of year are the young bats. They are called pups and like any pup, they make mistakes; they don't know their way around. They might fly down the chimney, rather than up, or instead of out the opening in the attic vent, or whatever path its parent takes. The same is true on its way back to the roost. They get lost and maybe your cat finds it, instead of the pup's bat mom. Such is the way of nature, of course, even with our own children making mistakes; except that our children offer excuses and apologies but bats can offer rabies. Rabies can be prevented in humans with a series of prophylactic shots, if begun within a week (approximately) of exposure. If, however, exposure was not recognized, then there is no treatment. You get rabies, you die from rabies. That is one "offering" we want to understand, respect and prevent!

Most bats are not carrying this dreaded disease. And, yet, most human cases of rabies in the United States are from bats. The difference between bats and other potentially rabid animals, such as raccoons or foxes, is that the bats seek out cavities for their roosts. With hollow trees, barns and caves presenting a declining and difficult housing market for the bats, they will seek out other places such as our attics. So, you see, it is not that the bat is more likely to be rabid than the fox; it is more likely that the bat will have closer contact with humans than the fox.

There is another perplexing, complicated and somewhat confusing aspect to the topic of exposure when it comes to bats, as opposed to the fox. You know when a fox has scratched or bitten you. You might not know that its saliva can expose you to rabies but, again, because it is a large animal, compared to a tiny bat; when asked by the animal control officer or the health agent, if the fox hissed at you, you know the answer. And you certainly know if that fox's saliva landed on your face or in your eyes. This spitting at close proximity scenario is less likely out in your back yard than it would be if you encountered a fox in your bedroom; right? And what are the chances of that?

Here's a different scenario: What if you woke up in the middle of the night to the sounds of something fluttering about your bedroom? What if a child woke up to a bat in his or her room? What if a person, who because of age, mental challenges, medication or intoxication woke up to a bat in the room? Would any of those people be able to tell you with certainty that the bat did not have contact?

Believe it or not, a bat's teeth are so tiny, (The Little Brown Bat weighs less than half an ounce!) that the bite is not always felt and does not always leave a noticeable mark. I am not exaggerating; there are documented cases of this.

In the above described circumstances, where exposure is uncertain, it is important to get that bat submitted to the state lab for testing.

A circumstance triggering testing for both bats and larger animals is when a pet is involved in a scuffle with the wild animal. The scuffle ends and kitty or fido is then comforted, checked, and cleaned by the family. They may not realize that saliva from that fighting wild animal can carry the rabies virus, and just as in other potentially infectious situations, cleanliness and protection through separation is critical. In the midst of an emotional scene where you are checking your pet, you may not even realize that you are wiping your brow or rubbing your eyes.

In these circumstances, the goal is to get the wild animal tested, in case there was exposure via saliva to your eyes or other mucous membrane. If the animal escapes and is unavailable for testing, then a careful interview has to happen to determine the possibility of exposure. When in doubt, treat and prevent.

Please call your police dispatch if you encounter these circumstances. They, in turn, will contact the board of health and animal control. (The animal inspector will contact the pet owner regarding quarantine.)

When in doubt, both you and I can call an epidemiologist on call at DPH.

All's well that ends well, that is handled well.

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