

9-6-08 The Bottom Line: Bugs, Bats and Bites

In high school I had a difficult time condensing knowledge. I studied all the information, large concepts and every detail to, hopefully, get that A. I hated to write. Where should I begin and what do I leave out? Those assignments limiting me to one page seemed impossible. The next page called out to me, to be filled with all the rest of the important details.

It wasn't until I was in college that another student taught me the study technique of writing a couple words in the margin as I read each paragraph. In time I learned that there were, in fact, main concepts supported by details. We had choices as to how we presented this information but, when pressed to cut to the chase, it proved useful to have already summarized the key concepts.

I am reminded of that lesson learned as I look at all the public health messages I receive on a daily basis. There are dangers lurking in the air, the water and our food supply. How shall we sort it all out? What shall I pass along and what shall I leave out?

Adding to the challenge of carefully planning that message, there is the unwanted confusion that results when one piece of advice seems to clash with another. You know what I mean; coffee is good for you and coffee is bad for you. That kind of conflicting information is unfortunate. We don't want people to throw up their hands and say, "What's the use? We're all going to die anyway, aren't we?"

While I can assume that anyone who has read this far, enjoys reading and takes the time to do so, we all need some assistance in sorting out the complexities of health threats. Sometimes we just want the bottom line. I called our wonderful State Department of Public Health recently to ask for the bottom line on bats and mosquitoes. This inquiry was in response to an email from a reader who was wondering if his well-intentioned bat houses were, in fact, helping to reduce the population of mosquitoes and, therefore, his chances of EEE and WNV. Or, he was wondering, had he simply exchanged one threat for another and was inviting the risk of rabies into his yard.

While the response of our State Vet, Catherine Brown, was detailed and supported by research, the bottom lines were as follows:

Bats houses do not reduce our risk of mosquito borne disease because mosquitoes are so tiny that bats cannot eat enough of them to significantly reduce the mosquito population. They eat mostly moths.

Bottom line #1: Do all you can to prevent the bite of a mosquito. Bats are not going to help you reach that goal.

While only a tiny percent of bats carry the rabies virus, those sick bats are more likely to act in a confused way and are more likely to cross paths with a human. Of the forty human deaths from rabies in the U.S. since 1990, thirty-eight were diagnosed as having the bat strain of rabies! While it is easy to know if a raccoon or a fox attacked you, you may not realize that a bat bit you. None of the people who died from rabies sought medical treatment! They did not know there was a risk.

Bottom line #2: If a bat was in your house when you or someone else was unaware of its presence, i.e., you wake up to one in your room, seek public health advice and seek medical attention.

Even if you do not want to use insect repellent to ward off mosquitoes and even if you allow stagnant water on your property all spring and into the summer, do all you can

to prevent mosquito bites from mid-August to mid-September. That is when the human cases of EEE and WNV have been contracted.

Bottom line #3: Concentrate and emphasize your mosquito fighting efforts for just those four weeks and lives will be saved!

And while we are talking about little things that bite, let's toss in a tick message, too. While Lyme disease can kill, it is more likely to cause illness severe enough to necessitate missing work and/or cause chronic disease. Chronic disease is a plague depleting our country of our most valuable natural resource: a nation of healthy, capable people. What do we need to know about ticks? Ticks do not hibernate and they do not migrate, unless it is unwittingly on the back of a deer or some other host. Ticks are like poison ivy: they are present and noxious all year long. You can reduce your chances of Lyme Disease by using repellants and wearing clothing soaked in tick-killing-Permethrin which has been allowed to dry and by removing ticks before they have the chance to spread disease.

Bottom line #4: Do a tick check each day and do all you can to prevent contact with them.

Was the bottom line method useful? What makes you pay attention? I am interested in hearing your thoughts because, after all, this is not a test.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for the Town of Halifax. She does, indeed, welcome your comments and can be reached at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us