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Bats are beautiful. Anything so unique, as to be able to fly with its hands and see with its ears, has a beauty of its own. Any animal whose ability to use echolocation, providing insight for the technology of the ultrasound image of a grandchild-to-be, is an amazing creature. Any animal eating thousands of insects each night, thus sparing or at least reducing the need for pesticides and saving the trees and crops from moth and beetle infestations, is a beautiful thing. Anything that can fly twelve to forty miles an hour in the dark, eat a meal along the way while avoiding tree branches and thin wires, is an amazing thing. No wonder Batman used this creature as a super hero model!

And these lone examples of flying mammals are everywhere. That is, they are everywhere that the “white nose” disease has not killed them and where their habitat has not been erased or where pesticides have not removed so many insects that they can’t find enough to eat.

But are they dangerous? Isn’t that what you want to know? Bats can carry and spread the rabies virus through a bite or if the sick animal’s saliva gets into a person’s eyes or nose. Now, think about that. You are probably thinking that you would know if a bat bit you or if its saliva got into your eyes. And I guess you would if you are an adult and you were awake. But what if you are an infant or child, or you were asleep, or you were mentally incapacitated (including intoxicated)? The teeth of the most common bat here in New England, the Little Brown Bat, are tiny. In fact, they are so tiny that you might not see the marks left by a bite.

This is why we need to test a bat if it is discovered in the room of someone sleeping, an infant or someone incapacitated. Otherwise, if you are certain that there was no exposure; you can open that window and leave the room, allowing the bat the opportunity to escape.

There are two times during the year when we are most likely to have a bat enter our home. The first visit might happen in early spring. They are returning and/or waking up and they make mistakes. My daughter Kate, who had many bat experiences in her former house, had her first visit in February one year. It was an isolated, incredibly warm day. Her bat removal guy said in all his years of dealing with bats he had never received calls in February. But that year, he received enough calls on that warm February day to keep him busy from early that morning to early the next morning at my daughter’s house, where he captured the bat in my grandson’s room. Fortunately, he knew it needed to be tested and, fortunately, it was negative for rabies.

The second time during the year when we might be visited by a bat in the home is in late July to mid August. At that time, the young pups are weaned and trying out their wings. They don’t know their way around and just might squeeze through that little space around the pull down stairs to the attic, when they meant to exit through the vent or soffit to the outdoors.

No exposure? Leave it alone and let it go. Any possibility of exposure? Get guidance on trapping and plan on testing. Uncertain because the child was asleep? Get help with trapping and plan on testing.

There is prophylactic (preventative) treatment for the person exposed and there is time to wait for the results. If the bat was negative, you don't need treatment. If the bat tests positive for rabies, you can start the treatment right away. Without treatment, people die from rabies; which is why public health officials take any potential rabies exposure so seriously.

If the bat isn't available for testing and you think there was even a slight chance of exposure, call your local health department and our wonderfully helpful Massachusetts Department of Public Health at Division of Epidemiology and Immunization at 617-983-6800.

Let's do all we can to prevent a human death from rabies. With awareness and knowledge, we can do that by leaving bats alone, testing them when there's been contact and treating people when there's been exposure or if we are uncertain of exposure.

They are still beautiful and vitally significant creatures in ecosystems the world over. It's not their fault that a small majority are ill with a contagious disease. That's true of people, too.

Let's stay healthy, be aware, and appreciate beauty wherever we are.

*Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax and Plympton, MA. Have you read the children's book, *Stellaluna* by Janell Cannon or *Bats at the Beach*, about Duxbury Beach by Brian Lies? They are sweet and beautifully illustrated. You can contact Cathleen at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us*