When it comes to bats, it’s good to be cautious

Ithaca, Stanton, St. Johns- Bats are highly misunderstood and aren’t quite as scary as horror movies make them out to be. They don’t typically chase people down dark alleys and attack in swarms. Instead, they perform several important functions in nature. Insect eating bats eat thousands of pesky mosquitoes while fruit-eaters help pollinate plants and disperse seeds. However, bats are one of the most common animals in Michigan to transmit rabies, so it’s a good idea to be cautious.

Rabies is a viral disease that attacks the nervous system and brain, leading to death if untreated. In the U.S., it is most commonly found in bats, but also in raccoons, skunks and foxes. People can get rabies if they are bitten by an infected animal. Early symptoms may include fever, weakness, headache and body aches.

Each spring and summer a small number of bats test positive for rabies. So far this year 24 animals have tested positive for rabies in Michigan, 23 of which were bats. Warning signs that an animal may have rabies include nervousness, aggression, excessive drooling and foaming at the mouth, wild animals losing their fear of humans, and animals usually active at night being seen during the day. Rabid animals may not always look or act sick, so if a bite occurs, the animal should be tested.

Bats would much rather be outside, but sometimes find themselves in our homes. Simply finding a bat in your house isn’t cause for alarm. However, you should take the following steps if a bite occurs; or if a bat is found near a sleeping person, a child, or someone who is mentally impaired or intoxicated:

- Do not let the bat go. Capture the bat in case it needs to be tested. Keep in mind that rabies testing is done on the brain, so be sure not to damage the head. While wearing a pair of leather gloves, wait for the bat to land and then approach it slowly. Place a box or coffee can over the bat. Slide a piece of cardboard with holes punched in it (to allow the bat to breathe) under the container to trap the bat inside. Tape the cardboard securely to the container. Call the Mid-Michigan District Health Department at 989-227-3111 in Clinton County, 989-875-1019 in Gratiot County, or 989-831-3615 in Montcalm County. Communicable disease nurses at the Health Department will assess your risk and determine if the bat needs to be tested. Please do not bring bats to the health department without calling first.

- Contact your doctor right away to see if you need treatment. Rabies can be prevented with a post-exposure vaccine that works best if given within 10 days of being bitten.

If a bat is found in the home but poses no threat, it most likely does not need to be tested for rabies. In this situation, you can capture the bat and set it free outside.

Keep bats out of your home by installing chimney caps, replacing loose soffits, flashings, eaves and siding. Also, cover roof vents with screens, make sure all doors shut tightly with no gaps, and make sure window screens are not damaged or torn.

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Additional steps you can take to keep your family safe:

- Avoid contact with wild animals, especially bats, skunks, raccoons and foxes.
- If a wild animal appears sick, report it to the Department of Natural Resources online at Michigan.gov/eyesinthefield or call 517-336-5030.
- Protect your pets by getting them vaccinated against rabies.