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Health officials warn against rabid bats

Oregon health officials are warning people to protect themselves and their pets from rabies after finding five rabid bats since the beginning of 2008.

"People can take two precautions to protect themselves and their pets from bats and rabies," said Dr. Emilio DeBess, public health veterinarian in the Oregon Department of Human Services State Public Health Division. "Never handle bats; and make sure your cats and dogs are up to date on their rabies vaccines."

Rabies is common among bats, DeBess said. Bats, which are most active in warm weather, play an important role in the ecosystem, especially in controlling insects at night. Oregon bats often eat mosquitoes and can catch over 1,000 tiny insects in an hour.

"Unfortunately, bats often carry rabies," said DeBess. "If you find a bat during the daylight hours, it is probably not healthy and should be avoided."

"Bats that don't have rabies generally don't fly into people," said DeBess. "So if a bat touches you, think about rabies and ask your doctor about vaccination."

Of the sick and dead bats tested in Oregon during the last 10 years, about 9.5 percent have had rabies.

Other mammals in Oregon can be infected with rabies from bats.

"Vaccinating pets against rabies protects them and provides a buffer zone between humans and rabid wild animals," he said. "And, sadly, if a pet is unvaccinated and is exposed to rabies, the recommendation is that it be euthanized."

Nationally, twice as many cats as dogs are reported to have rabies each year, underscoring the need for better vaccination coverage among cats, according to DeBess.

Rabies is an infectious viral disease that affects the nervous system and is almost always caused by exposure to a rabid animal. Exposure is usually through a bite but can also occur through scratches. It is almost always fatal once symptoms begin.

Human rabies is rare in the United States with two to six cases per year. But animal bites are very common and, as a result, thousands of people receive rabies post-exposure vaccinations each year, underscoring the importance of education and prevention, DeBess said.

Medical therapy for someone who has been exposed to rabies averages more than \$3,000.

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