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Warning on handling bats

Queensland Health is warning Queensland residents to avoid contact with bats.

The period between September and December is when most flying foxes give birth, and when authorities typically see a surge in the number of notifications of bites and scratches from bats.

Senior Director Communicable Diseases Dr Christine Selvey said scratches and bites required treatment to prevent the potential development of Australian bat lyssavirus (ABL) infection.

“It is a common occurrence throughout the birthing season for many young bats to be orphaned for different reasons, and people may feel inclined to pick them up or help them,” Dr Selvey said.

“Only vaccinated people who have been trained in the care of bats should handle a bat, regardless of its condition.”

Dr Selvey said each year there were more than 100 reported cases of potential exposure to ABL through people being scratched or bitten.

“The virus can be transmitted through a bat bite or scratch, or through exposure to their saliva,” she said.

“Because bats don’t normally approach humans, bat bites and scratches most commonly occur as a result of someone trying to rescue or pick up a sick, injured or distressed bat.”

Since 1996 there have been two deaths linked to exposure to ABL.

“Prompt treatment following a bite or scratch from a bat can prevent serious disease and possible death,” Dr Selvey said.

Dr Selvey recommends anyone who comes into contact with a sick or injured bat should make contact with a fully-vaccinated wildlife rescuer or carer who is trained to handle and care for bats.

“Residents can phone the Department of Environment and Resource Management on 1300 130 372 for advice,” she said.

In the event someone is bitten or scratched by a bat or exposed to bat saliva through the eyes, nose or mouth, Dr Selvey advised:

1. Do not scrub the wound - wash the wound gently but thoroughly for about five minutes with soap and water. If available, an antiseptic with anti-virus action such as

povidone-iodine, iodine tincture, aqueous iodine solution or alcohol (ethanol) should be applied after washing.

2. If bat saliva has got in the eyes, nose or mouth, flush the area thoroughly with water.
3. Contact a doctor or the nearest hospital immediately. Treatment involves a course of vaccinations that is necessary to protect the person against ABL. If the bat is available and tested and the results are negative for ABL, the course of vaccinations will not be required.

For more information visit health.qld.gov.au or call 13 HEALTH (13 432 584).

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