

Infected bats pose highest rabies risk in US: CDC

12 June 2019

Infected bats are the leading cause of rabies deaths in the United States, according to a report released Wednesday by health authorities which found the risk posed by dogs had significantly fallen.

Bats were responsible for 70 percent of rabies deaths in the US between 1960 and 2018, a striking figure because they account for just a third of the 5,000 rabid animals reported each year.

But the overall risk remains very low: of the approximately 59,000 rabies deaths worldwide every year, only two occur in the United States.

"Bats play a critical role in our ecosystem and it is important people know that most of the [bats](#) in the US are not rabid," said Emily Pieracci, the lead author of the report for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

"The problem comes when people try to handle bats they think are healthy because you really can't tell if an animal has rabies just by looking at it.

"The best advice is to avoid contact with bats—and other wildlife—to protect yourself from rabies."

The CDC said people may be underestimating the risk posed by the winged mammals and failing to recognize a bat scratch or bite, which can be smaller than the top of a pencil eraser, but this contact could still spread rabies.

On the other hand, people often worry about squirrels and opossum, but these animals generally don't carry the virus.

The report found that [domestic dogs](#) present much less of a risk than in the past thanks to the routine use of pet vaccines and the availability of post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP), which combines the rabies vaccine and rabies [immune globulin](#) to prevent infection after exposure to the virus.

Each year about 55,000 Americans get PEP treatment after being bitten or scratched by an infected or suspected infected animal.

However, exposure to rabid dogs while overseas was found to be the second-leading cause of rabies in Americans, and the CDC encouraged travelers to research the risks of their destination before traveling and even consider pre-exposure vaccines.

The rabies virus is transmitted through saliva, most commonly from the bite or scratch of an infected animal.

But the virus won't go on to cause the disease if [people](#) seek prompt treatment with PEP before the onset of symptoms, which can include increased aggression, fever, excess salivation and partial paralysis.

There is no treatment once signs of the disease begin, and it is fatal in humans and [animals](#) within one to two weeks.

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