

Rabies: The Silent Killer



Jupiter Images

A young child awakens early one morning to a fluttering sound coming from the blinds covering his bedroom window. He gets out of bed and notices what looks like a small bird flopping around on the floor. The child picks up the bird and realizes that it's not a bird but a bat and releases it out the window. Weeks later, the child develops a fever, headache, and becomes disoriented and is admitted to a hospital. Tragically, he dies two days later from what doctors diagnose as rabies.

This scenario is not uncommon when it comes to humans being infected with rabies. "In recent years, a lot of human cases of rabies have occurred in people who were scratched or bitten by a bat and didn't realize such contact can cause an infection with rabies," said Dr. Charles Rupprecht, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) lead researcher for rabies. "Anyone who is bitten or scratched by an animal needs to immediately wash the wound with soap and water, and then consult their doctor to see if further treatment is needed."

Rabies is a disease caused by a virus which attacks the central nervous system.

Early symptoms of the disease include fever, headache, and feeling tired. As the disease progresses, a person may experience difficulty sleeping, anxiety, confusion, paralysis, difficulty swallowing, and a fear of water. Death usually occurs within days of the onset of symptoms. Humans become infected with rabies when they are bitten or scratched by an animal infected with the virus. "Most animals behave oddly when they have rabies," said Dr. Rupprecht. "They may be really aggressive or they may be out and about in the day when they normally are out at night. Some people may not recognize such behavior as unusual so the bottom line is people need to avoid coming into contact with wild or stray animals, period."

Thankfully there is a highly effective treatment to prevent rabies in persons who have been exposed to an infected animal. A series of shots given over the course of a month is almost 100 percent effective in preventing the disease. However, for the shots to be most effective, they must be administered as soon as possible in someone who has been exposed. There are other steps people can take to prevent rabies too. "In addition to avoiding wild or stray animals, the most important thing people can do is to make sure their own pets are vaccinated against rabies," Dr. Rupprecht said.

For more information about rabies, call CDC at 1-800-CDC-INFO or visit www.cdc.gov/rabies.