



# Flying foxes & human health

## Important:

- Bats are not to be touched, the bats will get hurt if they are touched by someone other than a wildlife carer trained in care of bats and immunised.
- If dead bats are found, keep pets & children away, only use a shovel or steel gloves to move the bat for disposal
- If a bite or scratch occurs, wash wounds well, seek medical help asap. Medical help will likely involve a series of injections, including at the wound site.
- Bats, like other animals, carry other germs. Wash hands after handling bat faeces or urine.

## What is the risk to humans from bat diseases?

Bats and flying foxes may carry bacteria and viruses which can be harmful to humans but the risk of infection is low.

People who are not trained and vaccinated should not handle bats.

If you find an injured bat or flying fox, do not attempt to help the animal yourself or touch it in any way.

Please report sick or injured animals to WIRES 6778 4994 or Northern Tablelands Wildlife Carers 1800 008 290 and report unauthorised attempts to disturb flying-foxes to enviroline on 131 555.

## What diseases do bats carry?

**Australian bat lyssavirus (ABLV)** is a virus that can be spread to humans by the saliva of infected bats when the saliva comes in contact with mucous membranes or broken skin, or through bat bites or scratches.

**Hendra virus** can be transmitted to humans via close contact with the body fluids of infected horses.

**Leptospirosis** is a bacterial disease transmitted via the urine of infected animals.

**Salmonella** and other bacteria that cause gastroenteritis may be found in animal faeces.

## What are rabies and Australian bat lyssavirus?

Rabies virus and Australian bat lyssavirus (ABLV) belong to a group of viruses called lyssaviruses. These viruses are usually transmitted via a bite from an infected ("rabid") animal. They all cause a similar illness known as rabies, which affects the central nervous system and is usually fatal. Rabies virus does not currently occur in land dwelling animals in Australia. However, ABLV, which is closely related but not identical to rabies virus, does occur in Australia, and can be transmitted from bats to humans.

## How are they spread?

Both rabies and ABLV are spread from infected animals to people through bites or scratches, or by being exposed to infected animals' saliva through the eyes, nose, mouth or broken skin. Only mammals can be infected.

In Australia, evidence of ABLV infection has been found in species of flying foxes/fruit bats and insect-eating microbats. It is assumed that any bat in Australia could potentially carry ABLV. The behaviour or appearance of a bat is not an accurate guide as to whether it is carrying the virus. The rabies and ABLV viruses are unlikely to survive outside the bat or animal for more than a few hours, especially in dry environments that are exposed to sunlight. **Contact or exposures to bat faeces, urine or blood do not pose a risk of exposure to ABLV, nor do living, playing or walking near bat roosting areas, as long as bats are not handled.** Apart from two horses, no wild or domestic animals in Australia have ever been found to be infected with ABL.

## Who is at risk?

People who handle bats in Australia are at risk of ABLV infection.

## How is it prevented?

The best protection against being exposed to lyssaviruses (including ABLV) is to avoid handling any bat in Australia or overseas. Only people who have been vaccinated against rabies and who have been trained in handling bats should ever handle bats or flying foxes. Anyone who comes across an injured bat should contact the local Wildlife Information Rescue and Education Service (WIRES) network on 6778 4994. WIRES have trained staff who can deal with bats safely. A private veterinarian may also be able to offer assistance and advice. Do not touch the bat and avoid direct contact with any bat saliva.

## What should I do if bitten, scratched or exposed to a potentially infected animal?

Even if previously vaccinated, if you are bitten or scratched by a bat anywhere, you should:

- immediately wash the wound thoroughly with soap and water for at least five minutes - proper cleansing of the wound reduces the risk of infection
- apply an antiseptic with anti-virus action such as povidone-iodine, iodine tincture, aqueous iodine solution or alcohol (ethanol) after washing
- seek medical attention as soon as possible to care for the wound and to assess whether you are at risk of infection

If you are at risk of infection, you may require treatment consisting of a combination of rabies immunoglobulin and rabies vaccine. If you have not been vaccinated previously, you will require an injection of rabies immunoglobulin as soon as possible and a series of either four or five rabies vaccine injections over one month. If you have been vaccinated before with a full course of vaccination, you will require two further doses of vaccine. In NSW, Public Health Units will work with your doctor to assess your risk and where indicated, will arrange for rabies vaccines and immunoglobulin to be delivered to your GP or hospital.

**Lyssaviruses are a group of viruses that includes rabies and bat lyssavirus. Lyssavirus is carried by bats in Australia. Rabies is carried by mammals in many overseas countries. Both are spread by bites and scratches. These diseases can be prevented by rapid and thorough cleaning of the wound and by vaccination. There is no cure.**

## Rainwater tanks and swimming pools

**ABLV cannot be contracted from drinking or using water from rainwater tanks that is contaminated with bat faeces. For households using rainwater for food preparation and drinking, the risk of getting a gastro illness from bat faeces is no different than for other animals, including birds.**

Health risk from domestic swimming pools affected by bat faeces can be appropriately managed by maintaining effective pool disinfection. This involves regular backwashing of your pool filter, keeping your pool filter running every day to keep the water clear, maintaining free chlorine levels of around 2 milligrams per litre (or parts per million) and keeping pH between 7.2 and 7.8. Advice on pool maintenance can be obtained from your local pool store.

## Wildlife Health Australia collects and reports on bat testing:

<https://wildlifehealthaustralia.com.au/ProgramsProjects/BatHealthFocusGroup.aspx>

3.7% of bats tested were positive for ABLV on the last report, but this depends on the species with 4/55 Grey-headed flying fox & 0/40 Black flying fox testing negative.

The group has assisted the Australian Department of Agriculture and Water Resources and Animal Health Australia in updating the ABLV and Rabies AUSVETPLAN disease strategies and provides the National Animal Health Information System (NAHIS) with collated information on ABLV cases in bats.

# KIDS and bats don't mix!



Bats and flying foxes play a key role in the ecosystem and are protected in Australia. They are sometimes found lying on the ground or hanging low in trees, and may carry germs that can make you very sick, especially if they bite or scratch you.

## What should you do if you come across a bat?

- **Do not touch a bat**—even if it looks hurt! Sometimes bats might look dead but are still alive, so never touch any bats.
- Move away from the bat so you don't frighten it.
- Tell your parents, a teacher or another adult so they can get help for the bat by calling:
  - » RSPCA— (1300 278 358)
  - » Office of Environment and Heritage Enviro-line (131 555)
  - » Your local wildlife care group/rescuer/carer for assistance.



## What to do if you get bitten or scratched by a bat:

- It is very important to tell your parents, a teacher or another adult straight away. You will not get in trouble.
- An adult can help you wash the area with soap and running water. This should be done for at least 5 minutes.
- You will need to see a doctor straight away who will treat you to stop the germs making you sick.

<https://www.health.qld.gov.au/communicablediseases/hendra.asp>





For more information please visit our website at [www.armidaleregional.nsw.gov.au](http://www.armidaleregional.nsw.gov.au) or the following websites:

<http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/factsheets/Pages/rabies-australian-bat-lyssavirus-infection.aspx>

<http://conditions.health.qld.gov.au/HealthCondition/condition/14/217/14/Bats-human-health>

<https://wildlifehealthaustralia.com.au/ProgramsProjects/BatHealthFocusGroup.aspx>