

## Lyssavirus

In 1996, a new lyssavirus was discovered in Australia's fruit bat population, called 'Australian Bat Lyssavirus' or ABL. Lyssavirus is closely related to the classic rabies virus, although Australia is free of classic rabies virus.

ABL is the seventh type of lyssavirus to be found worldwide. The previously identified six varieties of Lyssavirus are not thought to be present in Australia. ABL has been found in bat populations in Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory, but experts recommend that people assume all bats across Australia are potentially infected.

### Symptoms of lyssavirus

Symptoms of lyssavirus include:

- Headache
- Fever
- Numbness
- Muscle weakness
- Collapse
- Coma.

Lyssavirus can be fatal, with two deaths reported in Australia since the virus was first discovered.

### Transmission of lyssavirus

Lyssavirus is transmitted by bites, scratches or splashes of infected blood or urine from an infected animal into a person's eyes, mouth or nose.

### Vaccination

Immunisation with the rabies vaccine can prevent disease. Vaccination consists of three injections of rabies vaccine into the muscle of the shoulder. The second dose is given seven days after the first and then a third is given 21 days after the second. Booster shots may be needed by people who have ongoing contact with bats. A blood test every two years should be done to check whether a booster shot is needed.

### High risk groups

People at risk of being bitten by bats should be routinely vaccinated. Certified volunteer bat handlers can get the vaccine for free. High risk groups include:

- Bat handlers and researchers
- Cavers
- Power-line workers
- Veterinarians and associated staff
- Wildlife officers.

### Treatment for bites or scratches

If a person has been bitten or scratched by a bat, the wound should be immediately thoroughly washed with soap and water and the bat should (if possible) be secured for testing. Vaccination as soon as possible after being bitten or scratched is extremely important, as this can prevent disease from occurring.

The following treatment by a doctor is recommended:

- Wash the wound thoroughly with soap and water.
- Treat with five doses of rabies vaccine starting immediately (day 0) and on days 3, 7, 14 and 28 if the person has not been previously vaccinated. If the person has been previously vaccinated, they will require two doses of rabies vaccine immediately (day 0) and on day 3.
- Treat with rabies immunoglobulin (an injection providing extra protection), if not previously vaccinated.

## Avoid bats

The simplest form of prevention is to avoid close contact with bats. Wildlife officers are advised not to hold or touch bats in front of the general public, as this suggests that bats can be safely handled.

If anyone encounters a sick or injured flying fox, they should not attempt to catch the animal, but call the DSE Customer Service Centre on 136 186 for referral to an authorised wildlife carer. If anyone suspects lyssavirus disease in a flying fox, they may contact the Department of Primary Industries animal disease hotline on 1800 675 888.

## Where to get help

- Your doctor

## Things to remember

- The Lyssavirus is a genus of viruses closely related to the classic rabies virus.
- The virus is transmitted to humans by bites or scratches from infected bats.
- The simplest form of prevention is to avoid handling bats.
- If bitten or scratched by a bat, or if bat blood or urine enters the eyes, mouth or nose, seek medical attention immediately.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

Department of Health - Communicable Disease Prevention and Control Unit

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