

Australian bat lyssavirus and rabies

What are Australia bat lyssavirus and rabies?

Australian bat lyssavirus (ABLV) and rabies belong to a group of viruses called lyssaviruses. These viruses are usually transmitted via a bite from an infected animal. They all cause a similar illness known as rabies, which affects the central nervous system resulting in paralysis, delirium, convulsions and death.

There have only been 3 human cases of ABLV disease in Australia, with the first case occurring in 1996 and all cases have died. The virus has been found in both fruit bats (flying foxes) and insect eating bats in Australia.

How is it 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 micro-bats. **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.

Overseas in rabies endemic countries, dogs are the main transmitter of rabies. Other animals that transmit rabies overseas include bats, monkeys, foxes, cats, raccoons, skunks, jackals and mongooses.

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. There is no risk of ABLV infection from eating flying foxes that have been thoroughly cooked.

Who is at risk?

People who handle bats in Australia are at risk of ABLV infection. People who come into contact with wild or domestic mammals, including bats, in a rabies endemic country are at increased risk of rabies infection.

Prevention

The best protection is to avoid handling bats. **Do not touch or try to rescue bats.** Only people who have been vaccinated against rabies and who have been trained in handling bats should ever handle bats or flying foxes. If you find a sick or injured bat, contact your nearest wildlife rescue service for assistance. [Report or rescue injured wildlife.](#)

Rabies vaccine is used to protect against rabies and ABLV infection before a potential exposure. A course of three injections, given over one month, is recommended for people whose job or other activities place them at increased risk of being bitten or scratched by bats in Australia or mammals in rabies endemic countries. Periodic booster doses of vaccine may also be required.

Treatment following exposure to a potentially rabid animal

Post exposure management comprises wound care, rabies vaccine and if indicated administration of human rabies immunoglobulin. A tetanus vaccine may also be required. Even if previously vaccinated, anyone who has been scratched or bitten by a potentially rabid animal should:

- Immediately wash the wound thoroughly with soap and water for at least 5 minutes - proper cleansing of the wound reduces the risk of infection. If bat saliva contacts the eyes/mouth or nose, flush area with water for several minutes
- Apply an antiseptic with anti-virus action such as povidone-iodine, aqueous iodine solution or alcohol (ethanol) after washing
- Seek medical attention as soon as possible (within 48 hours) to care for the wound and to assess whether rabies vaccine or rabies immunoglobulin is required.

For further information regarding post exposure treatment see [Australian Immunisation Handbook Lyssavirus exposure categories](#)

Contact

For more information contact the Public Health Unit's Centre for Disease Control in your region.

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