

Australian bat lyssavirus

What is it?

Australian bat lyssavirus (ABLV) is a virus that can be transmitted from bats to humans, causing serious illness. It is closely related but not identical to rabies virus.

ABLV has been found in both fruit bats (flying foxes) and insect eating bats in Australia. All bats should be viewed as potentially carrying the virus, although the risk of becoming infected is very low.

Surveys of wild bat populations have indicated less than one percent of bats carry ABLV.

How is it spread?

The virus can be transmitted from bats to humans when infected bat saliva enters the human body, usually by a bite or scratch. However it can also be spread by getting bat saliva in the eyes, nose or mouth or onto a pre-existing break in the skin.

ABLV cannot survive more than a few hours outside the bat. Contact such as patting bats or contact with their urine, faeces or blood does not pose a risk of exposure to ABLV, nor does living, playing or walking near bat roosting areas.

Signs and symptoms

ABLV infection in humans causes a serious illness which results in paralysis, delirium, convulsions and death. Since November 1996, three people have died as a result of ABLV infection, after being bitten or scratched by bats.

How is it prevented?

The best protection is to avoid handling bats. If you find an injured bat or flying fox, do not attempt to help the animal yourself or touch it in any way.

Contact the RSPCA (1300 ANIMAL) or your local wildlife care group/rescuer or the Department of Environment and Heritage Protection (1300 130 372) for assistance. Anyone who regularly handles or cares for bats should be vaccinated prior to exposure.



Treatment

If you are scratched or bitten take the following actions.

- Wash the wound thoroughly with soap and water for at least five minutes. Proper cleaning of the wound reduces the risk of infection. Apply an antiseptic solution after washing if possible (i.e. povidine-iodine).
- Cover the wound and seek medical attention immediately. Vaccination is still protective against ABLV if given promptly. Once a person develops the disease there is no specific treatment.
- If bat saliva contacts the eyes, nose or mouth, flush the area thoroughly with water for several minutes.
- A tetanus injection may also be necessary after a bat bite or scratch.

Contact with any bat fluids should generally be avoided. If you have any contact with bat fluids, wash your hands (or other affected area) immediately.

Disposal of dead bat

Do not directly touch it. Use a shovel or tongs and place into two plastic bags with your general rubbish.

If you suspect a bat could be suffering from ABLV contact your nearest wildlife rescue service for appropriate testing or disposal.