

January 24, 2014

## Health warning - don't handle injured bats

The South Western Sydney Local Health District Public Health Unit has issued a warning about the dangers of handling bats, given the threat of the deadly Australian Lyssavirus that can be passed on from bites and scratches from bats.

There is also reduced native food available currently, so the animals may be found foraging in backyard fruit trees, where they can become entangled in netting. Bats are sometimes injured and look for shelter, prompting people to pick them up or attempt to rescue them. They can also be distressed in periods of very hot weather.

Public Health Unit Director, Dr Leena Gupta advised that people avoid contact with all bats, as there was always the possibility of being scratched or bitten, which may lead to infection.

“Lyssavirus is rare in Australia and only transmitted through bites and scratches from bats,” Dr Gupta said.

“People should assume that all bats and flying foxes are infectious, regardless of whether the animal looks sick or not.

“People who have been scratched or bitten by bats run the risk of contracting an Australian Lyssavirus infection that could result in a rabies-like illness, which can be very serious and if not treated, may be fatal.

“If someone is bitten or scratched by any type of bat they should thoroughly clean the wound for at least five minutes with soap and water as soon as possible, apply an antiseptic solution to help prevent infection and seek urgent medical advice.

“If bitten or scratched you may require a series of injections to protect against Australian Lyssavirus infection and the first two need to be given as soon as possible. Your GP or local Public Health Unit can provide advice on treatment,” he said.

Dr Gupta said only people who have been fully vaccinated against rabies, who are using protective equipment and have been trained in bat handling should handle bats.

Dr Gupta also said there is a type of netting that can be used that won't trap bats. Details can be found at:

[http://www.wires.org.au/images/stories/pdf\\_other/Netting\\_Brochure\\_2012.pdf](http://www.wires.org.au/images/stories/pdf_other/Netting_Brochure_2012.pdf)

However, most importantly, Dr Gupta said: “If you come across a bat that is injured, distressed or caught in wire or netting, avoid all contact. Instead, contact the experts at WIRES on 1300 094 737.”

For more information about Australian Lyssavirus refer to the Bat Bites and Scratches Fact Sheet:

<http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/factsheets/infectious/rabiesbatinfection.html>