

Bat bit warning – avoid handling flying foxes

Hunter New England Health is warning the community to avoid handling bats to avoid catching a potentially deadly virus.

A number of individuals, that attempted to rescue injured bats, have been scratched or bitten in recent weeks. All had to be vaccinated against the potentially fatal Australian Bat Lyssavirus (ABL).

Public Health Physician Dr David Durrheim said bat bites and scratches may result in human infection with ABL, which is related to the rabies virus and can be lethal.

“The virus has been found in four species of fruit bats/flying foxes and at least three species of insect eating bats, so all Australian bats, both the larger flying foxes and the small insect eating bats are considered to have the potential to transmit lyssavirus,” he said.

Dr Durrheim said two Australians have died as a result of ABL in the past 11-years following bites or scratches from bats.

“Transmission of the virus from bats to humans is thought to be by a scratch or bite, but it is important to note that living, playing or walking near bat roosting areas does not pose a risk of exposure to ABL,” Dr Durrheim said.

“The best protection against being exposed to the virus is to avoid handling bats altogether.

“Only vaccinated people who have been trained in the care of bats should ever handle bats or flying foxes.

“If you come across an injured bat, contact the nearest wildlife rescuer/carer for assistance,” Dr Durrheim said.

Symptoms of ABL include headache, fever, malaise, sensory changes around the site of the bite or scratch, excitability, an aversion to fresh air and water, weakness, delirium and convulsions.

If bitten or scratched, immediately wash the wound thoroughly with soap and water for at least five minutes and apply an antiseptic solution.

It is important to immediately contact your GP or the Hunter New England Population Health Unit in Newcastle on (02) 4924 6499, Taree on (02) 6515 1853 and Tamworth on (02) 6767 8630 who will assess whether a series of rabies vaccinations is necessary.