

Health and Safety Department **Safety Note**

Safety Note No. 7/2002

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Contact with bats

Many people will be aware of the recent case in Scotland, in which a licensed bat worker died after contracting European Bat Lyssavirus (EBL), a rare form of rabies. He had had close contact with bats for conservation research purposes over several years, and is thought to have been bitten on a previous occasion. Rabies is a serious infection of the nervous system caused by a virus which is usually transmitted by a bite from an infected mammal. This Safety Note has been issued to reassure staff about the level of risk, and to remind bat workers and other staff of the appropriate precautions when in contact with bats.

Introduction

Most Trust staff are unlikely ever to come into contact with bats: only those who come into direct contact have any risk of contracting rabies, and that is a very small risk. Categories of staff who may come into contact with bats are:

- Staff members with a bat licence: - they will have undergone training in handling bats to gain their licence and will have been informed by the Statutory Nature Conservation Organisation (SNCO – i.e. English Nature, Countryside Council for Wales, or the N. Ireland Environment and Heritage Service) of the need to obtain pre-exposure rabies immunisation if they wish to exercise that licence. There are around 10 staff involved.
- Staff members with a known interest in bats or who are training to obtain a bat licence: - they may be called on by other Trust staff to remove a bat trapped in a room or found grounded. There are less than 20 people involved.
- Contracted bat consultants: - they may need to handle bats such as when catching bats for marking or identification, or during temporary removal from a site with development/remedial works in progress. Numbers are variable during the year, but are usually less than 20 people at any one time.
- Local bat group volunteers: - they may be sent along by the SNCO to check a property or tree for bats before development or remedial work, in which case they will be licensed (see above). Those volunteers leading bat walks are unlikely to handle bats - however, if they bring captive bats to bat talks or walks the public or staff must not come into contact with those bats. Seasonal, but usually less than 30 people involved at the peak time.
- Staff or Trust volunteers that encounter a bat trapped in a building: - perhaps 20 cases heard of per year (but some may contact the local bat group directly for advice and help).

Risks to bat workers

The main physical hazards arising are:

- bite
- hazards associated with the environment in which the work takes place, e.g. working at height, in enclosed spaces, in old buildings
- hazards associated with the time when work takes place, i.e. lone working, night working

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The main health hazards arising are:

- bat rabies
- tetanus
- histoplasmosis (rare respiratory condition from exposure to bat droppings)
- allergy (existing animal or dust allergies may be triggered by contact with bats or their droppings)

Fuller details are contained in a Model Risk Assessment on handling of bats, which is being issued at the same time as this Safety Note.

Precautions against health risks:

Rabies: the chance of contracting any form of rabies from a bat in the UK is very slight. There have only been three fatal cases in the whole of Europe since records began.

- Anyone who is likely to handle a bat should have pre-exposure rabies immunisation from his or her GP (it is a free service), and ensure that this immunisation is maintained. Contractors working with bats must have evidence of this immunisation.
- Avoid being bitten by wearing gloves that bat teeth cannot penetrate (such as leather) and a long-sleeve shirt and long trousers. If you are bitten, immediately wash the wound with soapy water and obtain post-exposure rabies immunisation from your GP.
- If the bat is acting strangely, keep it safe in a box and seek advice from the government's Veterinary Laboratories Agency on 01932 341111 (all hours). Do not kill it unless instructed. If in doubt contact the local bat group (details in office hours from the Bat Conservation Trust on 0845 1300 228).

Tetanus: any break of the skin may allow infection in, such as tetanus. Ensure you have up-to-date tetanus immunisation - this is obtainable from your GP.

Histoplasmosis: if possible, avoid disturbing accumulations of bat droppings. If they have to be removed, reduce dust generation by careful wetting. Collect in double heavy-duty plastic bags. Wear a suitable dust mask or respirator.

Allergy: a small number of people are allergic to bat hair or their dust. Avoid any contact, or use a suitable dust mask or respirator and gloves.

Risks to other property and building staff

The chance of Trust staff or volunteers encountering a bat is slight.

- The most likely scenario is when a bat becomes trapped indoors or is found grounded. In such cases seek advice from the local bat group. In a public place, either cover the bat with a box and slide a card beneath it to encourage it into the box, or use thick leather gloves to pick it up and transfer it to the box. In either case, cover arms and hands with long sleeves and gloves. Release the bat safely outside, again without touching it.
- Building staff and building contractors should never come into contact with bats as roosts are protected from disturbance, so no unlicensed person should enter or damage a roost. Occasionally a single bat may be encountered during building works, such as when tiles are lifted on a roof. In such cases, the finder should use a gloved hand to transfer the bat to a box and take it away to a safe place and seek advice from the SCNO. In all cases, contractors should be warned about the likely presence of bats and told not to touch them.
- During bat walks and talks, bats (such as injured bats brought along for show) should not be allowed to come into contact with anyone other than the licensed bat handler.

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Information for the public (based on information from the SCNOs and the Bat Conservation Trust)

- ❖ EBL (European Bat Lyssavirus – a member of the Lyssavirus group, which includes rabies) has been recorded in some species of European bats. There are two strains, EBL 1 and EBL 2.
- ❖ Classical (sylvatic) rabies (the type that foxes and dogs get) has never been recorded in bats in Europe.
- ❖ Since the 1970s there have been three cases in Europe where humans have contracted rabies from exposure to EBL and died (2 in Russia, 1 in Finland).
- ❖ Rabies surveillance has been carried out in the UK for 15 years with about 200 dead bats examined annually (= about 3,000 bats). Of these, only 2 have proved positive. These were both Daubenton's bats.
- ❖ It is possible that EBL is present at low levels in some species of bats, most likely Daubenton's. It has never been recorded in pipistrelles, two of which are by far the most common species of bat in the UK. Daubenton's bats rarely roost in houses. Of the 3,000 bats examined for EBL, only 35 were Daubenton's, which gives an indication of how rarely they come into contact with people.
- ❖ All 16 species of bats are protected.
- ❖ Bats depend heavily on buildings for roosting. Having bats in the roof void, walls or associated cavities carries no risk of rabies, particularly as the most common species have never been recorded as carrying EBL.
- ❖ Risk of exposure to EBL can be eliminated by not handling bats and thus avoiding being bitten or scratched.
- ❖ Post-exposure treatment is believed to be completely effective. In the Netherlands between 1987 and 1991, a total of 174 people were bitten by infected bats and received post-exposure treatment. None developed any illness.

References

Bat Conservation Trust

0845 1300 228 for local bat group contacts.

website for details of bat species and more information www.bats.org.uk

Bat Workers' Manual 1999. Joint Nature Conservation Committee.

SNCO: England - English Nature; Wales - Countryside Council for Wales; N Ireland - Environment & Heritage Service. Telephone directories give local offices.

Nature Conservation Publications:

http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-chl/w-countryside_environment/w-nature/w-nature-resources.htm