NEWS RELEASE

Illinois Department of Public Health

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State public health director is warning to stay away from bats

SPRINGFIELD – After a rabid bat was recently found in Springfield, Dr. Eric E. Whitaker, state public health director, today reminded the public to avoid contact with bats that typically become more active in August and September.

"Bats are the primary carrier of rabies in Illinois," Dr. Whitaker said. "It is best never to approach a bat and, if found in a home or building, people should leave the bat alone and contact an animal control agency or local public health department for assistance with removing it."

So far this year, 16 bats have tested positive for rabies in Illinois. The Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) and local health departments have responded to numerous calls from people describing encounters with bats and asking for advice.

"While our natural instinct may be to help or befriend bats or other animals that appear friendly or are injured, don't do it. Stray and wild animals should be avoided," said Connie Austin, state public health veterinarian. "Children especially should be warned against petting or trying to assist a wild or unfamiliar animal."

Rabies is an infectious viral disease that affects the nervous system of humans and other mammals. Humans get rabies after being bit by an infected animal or if infectious material from a rabid animal, such as saliva, gets directly into their eyes, nose, mouth or a wound. Without anti-rabies treatment, rabies is a fatal disease.

Any wild mammal such as a raccoon, skunk, fox, coyote or bat, can have rabies and transmit it to humans. The animal does not have to be foaming at the mouth or be exhibiting other symptoms to have rabies.

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Changes in the animal's normal behavior such as difficulty with walking, or just an overall appearance of illness, can be early signs of rabies. For example, skunks, which normally are nocturnal and avoid contact with people, may appear friendly or ill and may approach humans during daylight hours.

A bat that is active during the day, found in a place where bats are not usually seen (such as in a home or on the lawn), or is unable to fly is more likely than others to be rabid. Such bats are often easily approached but should never be handled.

Over the past century, rabies incidence in the country has changed dramatically. More than 90 percent of all animal cases reported annually now occur in wildlife, while before 1960, most cases occurred in domestic animals. There is an average of one to two cases of rabies in the United States each year, but no human cases have occurred in Illinois since 1954.

The following tips can help prevent the spread of rabies:

- Be a responsible pet owner. Keep vaccinations up-to-date for all dogs, cats and ferrets. This requirement is important to not only keep your pets from getting rabies, but also to provide a barrier of protection for you if your animal is bitten by a rabid animal.

- Keep pets under direct supervision so they do not come in contact with wild animals. If your pet is bitten by a wild animal or exposed to a bat, seek veterinary assistance for your pet immediately.

- Call the local animal control agency to remove stray animals in your neighborhood.

- Avoid direct contact with unfamiliar animals. Do not handle, feed or unintentionally attract wild animals with open garbage cans or litter.

- Never adopt wild animals or bring them into your home. Do not try to nurse sick animals to health. Call animal control or an animal rescue agency for assistance.

- Teach children never to handle unfamiliar animals, wild or domestic, even if they appear friendly. "Love your own, leave other animals alone" is a good principle for children to learn.

- Prevent bats from entering living quarters or occupied spaces in homes, churches, schools and other similar areas where they might come in contact with people or pets.

For more information about rabies, log onto the IDPH website at
www.idph.state.il.us/health/infect/reportdis/rabies.htm

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