

Paw Prints Oct '06  
Bats, Cats, Rabies ... Oh My!  
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As Halloween approaches bats are a popular decorating theme, but when live bats enter our homes they become less than popular guests! This has been an exceptionally bad year for pet and human exposure to these little mammals. House cats may be exposed to Rabies when bats enter our living spaces, and Rabies is our main concern here.

Unfortunately, a far greater percentage of pet cats than dogs are never seen by a veterinarian. Since Rabies vaccination in Wisconsin may only be performed by a licensed veterinarian, there is a relatively large population of unvaccinated cats. There is also a fairly high incidence of homes that do have bats in the attic. It is estimated that up to 60% of older homes and possibly 80% of homes older than 30 years have either bats or mice in the attic spaces. Cats retain a very strong predator instinct and even the most cuddly, elderly house cat would be readily tempted to chase, catch or play with a bat. And, as you would expect, an ill bat would be so much easier to catch, and thus the potential exposure. Despite the "Cujo" reputation for dogs as vectors of Rabies to humans, more cats are diagnosed as rabid each year in the US, and more people are exposed by rabid cats than by dogs.

Certainly not all bats harbor the Rabies virus, but they are potential carriers. Foxes, skunks, raccoons and bats are the most common carrier animals in North America. Rabies is such a devastating disease, virtually always fatal, and readily communicated to humans. Rabies vaccination is safe and provides very effective protection for both cats and dogs. The vaccine must be given prior to the exposure. Wisconsin state law mandates that all dogs over the age of 4 months be Rabies immunized and maintained current for Rabies protection. Cat vaccination is not required by the state, but is required by many municipalities. State law does require the quarantine or destruction and testing of exposed cats and dogs. Currently immunized pets may be quarantined in the owners' residence, but non-vaccinated cats and dogs may be ordered destroyed or quarantined in veterinary supervised facilities for up to 4 months at the owners expense. These laws are very strict and seriously enforced.

If a bat is found in the home and there is any possible human or animal exposure then that bat must be tested for Rabies. It is imperative that the

bat not be released outside or that it not be killed in a manner that destroys the head which is the part needed for testing. If the bat cannot be tested, then the bat is considered rabid.

Once again, periodic veterinary care for all of our pets is really the best way to protect their health and well being. In the case of Rabies protection, that care can make a life or death difference, and "it's the law!"