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Families being contacted after rabid bat handled by children

The Sarasota County Health Department received laboratory confirmation today that a bat in the recent possession of a school-age child tested positive for rabies. On Monday, April 15, the student carried the bat around Gocio Elementary School, allowing peers to touch it, and brought it in the bus to an after-school-care program at the Boys and Girls Club on Fruitville Road.

The bat remained in the backpack while the child was at the Boys and Girls Club. Health department officials are notifying the parents of the children known to have had contact with the bat so that appropriate medication can be given. Parents with questions are encouraged to contact the Sarasota County Health Department's Environmental Health office at 941-861-6133, or after hours, at 941-504-7831.

Rabies is a deadly viral disease affecting the nervous system. The virus is spread through saliva and can be passed to another animal or a person, usually through a bite. Infection may also occur if the saliva enters open wounds, the mouth or eyes of another animal or person.

"To prevent rabies, everyone should avoid contact with wildlife," said Chuck Henry, the county's environmental health administrator. The vast majority of rabies cases occur in wild animals like raccoons, bats, skunks, feral cats, bobcats, coyotes, otters and foxes. Domestic animals including cats, dogs and ferrets are at risk if not vaccinated.

The rabies vaccine and immunoglobulin treatment regimen provides protection after an exposure occurs if administered in a timely manner before symptoms appear. There is no treatment for rabies after symptoms of the disease appear. People who are bitten by an animal are urged to go to a hospital, family doctor or county health department for immediate medical attention. The bite site should be washed with soap and running water for five to 10 minutes.

The Sarasota County Health Department urges the public to take these important steps to prevent the exposure to rabies:

- Prevent bats from entering living quarters or occupied spaces in homes, churches and schools, where they might come in contact with people and pets. If you find a bat in your home, contact Animal Services or the health department.
- Do not handle or feed wild animals such as raccoons, bats, skunks and foxes.
- Never adopt wild animals or bring them into your home. Don't try to nurse sick animals to health. Call animal control or an animal rescue agency for assistance.

- Be cautious around wildlife displaying suspicious signs of behavior, such as unusual aggression and/or the lack of fear of humans and unusual daylight activity. Report them to Sarasota County Animal Services at 941-861-9500.

For more information on rabies, go to the Florida Department of Health Web site at <http://www.doh.state.fl.us/environment/medicine/rabies/rabies-index.html>, or contact the Sarasota County Health Department, Environmental Health office, at 941-861-6133.

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