

Three Dogs in Danger After Fight With Rabid Bat

Dogs' owner and veterinarian recommend vaccinating all pets against the virus.

By Annika Small

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Ric Metts of Cleveland, Texas, returned home one recent evening and was told by his nephew, Caleb, that his three dogs had caught a bat. The dogs – a 2-year-old Boston Terrier named Carter, an 18-month-old Smooth Fox Terrier named Fee and a 5-month-old Wire Fox Terrier named Mark – had been playing in the backyard and, before Caleb could stop them, they had used their natural terrier instincts for hunting to attack the bat. What happened next was every dog owner's worst nightmare.

After putting on thick gloves, Caleb removed the still-live bat from the yard and put it in a plastic bag. He then burned the gloves. When Metts came home and heard the story, he consulted his local veterinary clinic, which told him to send the bat to the Animal Control's bite division for rabies testing.

Rabies is a deadly virus. Once an animal is infected, the disease spreads through the nerves and to the brain and, eventually, to the salivary glands, from where it can be transmitted to humans and other warm-blooded animals, usually through biting. It is uncommon in dogs and especially rare in humans, but it is fatal if not quickly treated, and causes a variety of symptoms, including aggression and difficulty breathing.

The state of Texas, where Metts and his dogs live, requires that all domestic dogs and cats be vaccinated against rabies by 4 months of age. An additional booster is required one year after the first vaccination, and must be repeated in three-year intervals. However, the vaccine does not guarantee protection against infection; it simply lowers animals' chances of contraction. Thankfully, all three of Metts' dogs, including the puppy, had had at least one rabies vaccine prior to their encounter with the bat.

Six days after sending the bat off, Metts received word it had tested positive for rabies. He was also told that the state of Texas recommends euthanasia for all dogs under the age of 3 who have had contact with a rabid animal, to prevent further transmission of the disease. All three of Metts' dogs are under the age of 3.

Distraught, Metts asked his veterinarian, Cara Campbell, D.V.M., what she recommended. She advised him against euthanasia unless absolutely necessary – if the dogs tested positive for rabies. She also told him to have the dogs given rabies boosters immediately. His nephew, Caleb, wasn't bitten, so he is safe from the disease.

It can take three to eight weeks for the rabies virus to incubate in dogs (three to six weeks in humans), so Metts won't know for a while whether his dogs contracted the disease. Fortunately, dogs aren't very susceptible to rabies, so their chances of infection are low.

But because rabies is such a dangerous disease, Metts has been advised to keep his three dogs quarantined for 90 days, which he is able to do on his property's kennel facility. The dogs will also need three rabies boosters and then they will be tested.

Campbell and Metts strongly advocate vaccinating all pets against rabies. Campbell recommends vaccinating adult dogs once a year, and says that puppies should have booster shots one to two months after the first vaccine. Federal law mandates that all domestic dogs and cats be vaccinated, but unfortunately, many aren't, risking the transmission of rabies to both pets and humans.

When purchasing or adopting a pet, make sure the animal has been properly vaccinated against rabies. "I am amazed at the number of breeders that do not vaccinate for rabies," Metts says. Metts and Campbell hope that Metts' story will inspire more people to get their pets vaccinated.

All that's left for Metts to do now is wait and hope for the best.

Annika Small is the Assistant Editor of the Popular Dogs series.