



COVID-19 and Australian bats – information for bat carers and others interacting with bats

12 May 2020

Wildlife Health Australia, in collaboration with government and non-government stakeholders, is continually assessing information on the COVID-19 situation. This includes consideration of the theoretically possible but unknown risk of transmission of SARS-CoV-2 from humans to bats and other wildlife in Australia. Within this context, WHA has provided guidance below to bat carers and others interacting with bats. This guidance is based on current knowledge (12 May 2020). As this is a dynamic situation, we will continue to assess new information within the Australian context, and update our guidance accordingly. More stringent precautions may become necessary if the situation changes.

Information on COVID-19 and Australian wildlife is provided in the WHA fact sheet: [Novel Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\)](#). Further information on COVID-19 and animals can be found from the [Australian Veterinary Association](#) and [World Organisation of Animal Health - OIE](#). Please refer to the [WHA website](#) for links to key documents and websites.

Potential involvement of Australian bats in SARS-CoV-2 transmission

There is no evidence of SARS, SARS-CoV-2 or SARS-CoV-2-like viruses in Australian wildlife. Betacoronaviruses have been found in [a variety of Australian bat species](#); however, SARS-CoV-2 is not closely related to any known Australian bat coronaviruses.

Precautions when in contact with Australian bats

Disease transmission from bats to humans: There is no evidence to suggest that bats or other wildlife in Australia pose a risk of SARS-CoV-2 infection to humans. Nevertheless, only people who are trained and rabies-vaccinated, and using appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) should handle bats, to reduce the risk of exposure to other diseases such as [Australian bat lyssavirus](#).

Disease transmission from humans to bats: Human to animal transmission of SARS-CoV-2 is very rare (see the [WHA fact sheet](#) for more information), and transmission from a human to a bat has not been reported. However, it is safest to assume that any mammal wildlife species may have the potential to be infected with SARS-CoV-2 from close exposure to an infected human (similar situations to those described as risky for human to human transmission). Appropriate precautions are always recommended before, during and after contact with bats or other wildlife and their food, supplies and excreta (see [National Wildlife Biosecurity Guidelines](#)).

The following advice is provided as guidance and may need to be adapted to the situation. Animal welfare and human safety should not be compromised.

Bats in care:

- Protect the bats in your care by protecting yourself. Follow the [public health guidelines](#) for minimising COVID-19 transmission risk between other people and yourself.
- People who have COVID-19 like symptoms should avoid contact with bats and other wildlife wherever possible. If you care for wildlife, you should have a plan in place for the animals in your care in the event you become sick or have to self-isolate.

- A person who is a COVID-19 case, or identified by the Public Health agency as a close contact of a COVID-19 case, should not have any contact with bats or other wildlife. You should advise the Public Health agency that you have bats in your care, and that you are concerned about transmission risk. The Public Health agency will liaise with the state/territory Agriculture and Environment agencies as needed, to determine how the bats can be best cared for. If continued contact with bats is unavoidable, you should reduce the risk by wearing respiratory PPE including a [face mask](#) (see note on masks below), in addition to [standard PPE for handling bats](#) (puncture-resistant gloves, etc).
- Where possible, reduce the number of bats in care in individual homes.
- Minimise the number of people interacting with the bats in your care. For example, if you care for bats in your home, house them in a room or area that is physically separate from the general living spaces. Other household members should not enter this area.
- Wherever possible, apply the same precautions recommended for prevention of human-to-human transmission to your interactions with bats.
- Practice [good hygiene](#):
 - Wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds BEFORE AND AFTER interacting with bats, their food, excreta, equipment and/or enclosures.
 - Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth.
 - Cough and sneeze into your elbow.
- Avoid unnecessary contact with bats. In situations where it is practical, apply “social distancing” by keeping at least 1.5m away from bats. Very close contact (such as kissing, bringing the face in contact with the bat or blowing breath on the bat) should never be practiced.
- Always wear appropriate PPE when handling bats.
- A note on the use of face masks: Wearing a surgical mask can help prevent spread of COVID-19 by an infectious person. [Current public health guidance](#) does not recommend wearing a mask unless a person is unwell. If this advice changes or you choose to wear a face mask, make sure you know [how to use it](#) and dispose of it appropriately. Using a mask incorrectly can increase the risk instead of reducing it. As outlined above, if you are a COVID-19 case or identified by the Public Health agency as a close contact of a COVID-19 case, and it is not possible for bats to be transferred to another carer, use of a face mask is recommended during any interaction with the bats.
- If practical, wear dedicated clothing when interacting with bats. Otherwise, cover your clothing e.g. wear an apron that is only used for that purpose. Wash clothing regularly (see ‘Cleaning and disinfection’ below).
- Clean linen, equipment, enclosures and surfaces regularly (see ‘Cleaning and disinfection’ below).

Bats used in research/ecological consultancies:

- Follow the [public health guidelines](#) for minimising COVID-19 transmission risk between other people and yourself. Follow the relevant biosafety and animal ethics regulations from your institute, where applicable.
- Personnel who have COVID-19 like symptoms should not have any contact with wildlife, whether in captivity or in the field.
- Personnel who have bats in captivity should have a formal plan in place if they become sick or have to self-isolate. Many research institutes will require this plan to be lodged with their relevant Animal Ethics Committee.

- A person who is a COVID-19 case, or identified by the Public Health agency as a close contact of a COVID-19 case, should not have any contact with bats or other wildlife. If you have bats in captivity, you should advise the state/territory Public Health agency and the relevant Animal Ethics Committee (if applicable). The Public Health agency will liaise with the state/territory Agriculture and Environment agencies as needed, to determine the best way to continue the husbandry of the bats. If continued contact with bats is unavoidable, you should reduce the risk by wearing respiratory PPE including a [face mask](#) (see note on masks below), in addition to [standard PPE for handling bats](#) (puncture-resistant gloves, etc).
- Minimise the number of people interacting with bats.
- Wherever possible, apply the same precautions recommended for prevention of human-to-human transmission to your interactions with bats.
- Practice [good hygiene](#):
 - Wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds BEFORE AND AFTER interacting with bats, their food, excreta, equipment and/or enclosures.
 - Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth.
 - Cough and sneeze into your elbow.
- Avoid unnecessary direct contact with bats. Where practical, apply “social distancing” by keeping at least 1.5m away from bats. Very close contact (including blowing breath on the bat e.g. to encourage it to move) should never be practiced.
- Always wear appropriate PPE when handling bats.¹
- A note on the use of face masks: Existing biosafety protocols for working with bats should continue as normal. Wearing a surgical mask can help prevent spread of COVID-19 by an infected person. [Current public health guidance](#) relating to COVID-19 transmission does not recommend wearing a mask unless a person is unwell. If this advice changes, or you choose to wear a face mask, or a face mask is part of your existing biosafety protocols, make sure you know [how to use it](#) and dispose of it appropriately. Using a mask incorrectly can increase the risk instead of reducing it. As outlined above, if you are a COVID-19 case or identified by the Public Health agency as a close contact of a COVID-19 case, and it is not possible to make other arrangements for the care of the bats, use of a face mask is recommended during any interaction with the bats.
- Wear dedicated clothing when interacting with bats. Wash clothing regularly (see ‘Cleaning and disinfection’ below).
- Clean catching and laboratory equipment, enclosures and surfaces regularly (see ‘Cleaning and disinfection’ below).

Cleaning and disinfection

- For advice on cleaning and disinfection:
 - Australian Government Department of Health: [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Information about routine environmental cleaning and disinfection in the community](#)
 - Safe Work Australia: [Cleaning to prevent the spread of COVID-19](#)
- Clothing and other linen should be washed in a regular cycle wash using the warmest possible setting with normal washing detergent (see Safe Work Australia link above).

¹ Newman, S. H., Field, H., Epstein, J., & De Jong, C. (2011). Investigating the Role of Bats in Emerging Zoonoses: Balancing Ecology, Conservation and Public Health Interest. *FAO Animal Production and Health Manual*, 12. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Rome.
<http://www.fao.org/3/i2407e/i2407e00.htm> (Chapter 9: Safe Handling of Bats)