



► Return to Web version

Cat and Dog Bites

How should I take care of a bite from a cat or a dog?

Here are some things you should do to take care of a wound caused by a cat or dog bite:

- If necessary, call your doctor (see the list below).
- Wash the wound gently with soap and water.
- Apply pressure with a clean towel to the injured part to stop the bleeding.
- Apply a sterile bandage to the wound.
- Keep the injury elevated above the level of the heart to slow swelling and prevent infection.
- Report the incident to the proper authority in your community (for example, animal control office or police).
- Apply antibiotic ointment to the area 2 times every day until it heals.

Call your doctor in any of these situations:

- You have a cat bite. Cat bites often cause infection. You don't need to call your doctor for a cat scratch, unless you think the wound is infected.
- You have a dog bite on your hand, foot or head, or you have a bite that is deep or gaping.
- You have diabetes, liver or lung disease, cancer, acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) or another condition that could weaken your ability to fight infection.
- You have any signs of infection, such as redness, swelling, warmth, increased tenderness, oozing of pus from the wound or fever.
- You have bleeding that doesn't stop after 15 minutes of pressure or you think you may have a broken bone, nerve damage or another serious injury.
- Your last tetanus shot (vaccine) was more than 5 years ago. (If so, you may need a booster shot.)

What will my doctor do?

Here are some things your doctor may do to treat a cat or dog bite:

- Examine the wound for possible nerve or tendon damage, or bone injury. He or she will also check for signs of infection.
- Clean the wound with a special solution and remove any damaged tissue.
- May use stitches to close a bite wound, but often the wound is left open to heal, so the risk of infection is lowered.
- May prescribe an antibiotic to prevent infection.
- May give you a tetanus shot if you had your last shot more than 5 years ago.
- May ask you to schedule an office visit to check your wound again in 1 to 2 days.
- If your injury is severe, or if the infection has not gotten better even though you're taking antibiotics, your doctor may suggest that you see a specialist and/or go to the hospital, where you can get special medicine given directly in your veins (intravenous antibiotics) and further treatment if necessary.

Will I need a rabies shot?

Probably not. Rabies is uncommon in dogs and cats in the United States. If a dog or cat that bit you appeared to be healthy at the time of the bite, it's unlikely that the animal had rabies. However, it's a good idea to take some precautions if you're bitten by a dog or cat.

If you know the owner of the dog or cat that bit you, ask for the pet's vaccination record (record of shots). An animal that appears healthy and has been vaccinated should still be quarantined (kept away from people and other animals) for 10 days to make sure it doesn't start showing signs of rabies. If the animal gets sick during the 10-day period, a veterinarian will test it for rabies. If the animal does have rabies, you will need to get a series of rabies shots (see below).

If the animal is a stray, or you can't find the owner of the dog or cat that bit you, call the animal control agency or health department in your area. They will try to find the animal so it can be tested for rabies.

If the animal control agency or health department can't find the animal that bit you, if the animal shows signs of rabies after the bite, or if a test shows that the animal has rabies, your doctor will probably want you to get a series of rabies shots (also called postexposure prophylaxis). You need to get the first shot as soon as possible after the bite occurs. After you receive the first shot, your doctor will give you 5 more shots over a 28-day period.

How can I prevent cat and dog bites?

Here are some things you can do to prevent bites:

- Never leave a young child alone with a pet.
- Do not try to separate fighting animals.
- Avoid sick animals and animals that you don't know.
- Leave animals alone while they're eating.
- Keep pets on a leash when in public.
- Select your family pet carefully, and be sure to keep your pet's vaccinations (shots) up-to-date.

Reviewed/Updated: 9/05
Created: 9/00

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.

Copyright © 2000-2005 American Academy of Family Physicians
Permission is granted to print and photocopy this material for nonprofit educational uses.
Written permission is required for all other uses, including electronic uses.
[Home](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [About This Site](#) | [What's New](#)