

Cat-Scratch Disease

What is cat-scratch disease, and how do people get it?

Cat-scratch disease is an infection caused by bacteria (germs) carried in cat saliva. The bacteria can be passed from a cat to a human. Cats may get the bacteria from fleas, although this hasn't been proved.

You can get cat-scratch disease from a cat bite or cat scratch. You can get the infection after a cat scratches you if the cat's paws have the bacteria on them. (A cat can get the bacteria on its paws when it licks itself.) With a cat bite, the cat can pass the bacteria to you in its saliva. You can also get the bacteria in your eyes if you pet a cat that has the bacteria on its fur and then rub your eye with the hand you used to pet the cat. Many people who get cat-scratch disease do not remember being scratched or bitten by a cat.

Cat-scratch disease is not a severe illness in people who are healthy. But it can be a problem in people with weak immune systems. People with weak immune systems include those who are receiving chemotherapy for cancer, those who have diabetes or those who have acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS).

Should I call my doctor if I am bitten or scratched by a cat?

Call your family doctor if you notice any of the following problems:

- A cat scratch or bite that does not heal in the usual length of time
- An area of redness around a cat scratch or bite that continues to get bigger for more than two days after the injury
- Fever that lasts for several days after a cat scratch or bite
- Painful and swollen lymph nodes for more than two or three weeks
- Bone or joint pain, abdominal pain (without fever, vomiting or diarrhea) or an unusual degree of tiredness for more than two or three weeks

What are the signs of cat-scratch disease?

A sore may develop where a cat has bitten or scratched you. The sore might not happen right away. It may take 3 to 10 days for the sore to appear after the bite or scratch.

The sore may take a long time to heal. An infection of the lymph nodes (also called lymph glands) also develops, most often in the glands that are near the place where you got the

cat scratch or cat bite. For example, if the infection is from a cat scratch on your arm, the glands in your armpit may become tender and swollen. The lymph nodes may swell to an inch or more in size.

Cat-scratch disease can occur in other parts of the body. Some people get the infection on an eyelid or underneath an eyelid. Other people get a rash over their entire body. Still other people get an infection of the liver or spleen or an infection of the bones or the joints.

What tests are needed to diagnose cat-scratch disease?

If you remember that you were bitten or scratched by a cat, your doctor will probably be able to diagnose the illness based on the fact that you were bitten or scratched and then got painful, swollen lymph nodes. When the diagnosis is not clear, a blood test may help your doctor make the diagnosis.

How is cat-scratch disease treated?

In most people, cat-scratch disease clears up without treatment. However, antibiotics (medicines that kill bacteria) may be needed when infected lymph nodes stay painful and swollen for more than 2 or 3 months. Antibiotics may also help if you have a fever for a long time or if the infection is in your bones, liver or another organ.

If a lymph node is very large or painful, your doctor may drain it to help relieve the pain. The lymph node is drained by putting a needle through normal skin off to the side of the node and moving the needle to the swollen node. The needle is then inserted into the node and the fluid in the node is drained out.

Can cat-scratch disease be prevented?

Avoiding cats is the simplest way to prevent the disease, but it is not usually necessary to get rid of your cat. Having your cat declawed stops your cat from being able to spread the infection by scratching you. Washing your hands carefully after handling your cat is another way to prevent the infection. Getting rid of fleas on your cat may also help.

Cats only seem to be able to transmit this infection for a few weeks. Young cats seem to be more likely to carry the bacteria than older cats. Households with kittens have higher rates of infection. If the kittens have fleas, the infection rate is 29 times higher than if the kittens do not have fleas.

Should cats be treated?

Cats require no treatment. The bacteria doesn't cause a sickness in cats. They merely carry the bacteria that causes cat-scratch disease in people.

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.

Visit familydoctor.org for more useful information on this and many other health-related topics.

Permission is granted to reproduce this material for nonprofit educational purposes. Written permission is required for other uses, including electronic uses.