

What to Do About a Cat or Dog Bite

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:

- 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 (e.g., police or animal control office).

Should I call my doctor if I've been bitten by a cat or a dog?

Call your doctor in any of these situations:

- You have a cat bite. Cat bites are very prone to 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 another bite that is deep or gaping.
- You have diabetes, liver or lung disease, cancer or acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), or other conditions that 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 other serious injury.
- Your last tetanus shot was more than five 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:

- Your doctor will examine the wound for possible nerve or tendon damage, or bone injury. He or she will also check for signs of infection.
- Your doctor will clean the wound with a special solution and remove any damaged tissue. (If you don't need to see your doctor, you should still clean the wound with soap and water and apply antibiotic ointment to the area two times every day until it heals.)
- Sometimes stitches are used to close a bite wound, but often the wound is left open to heal, so the risk of infection is lowered.
- Your doctor may prescribe an antibiotic to prevent infection.
- Your doctor may give you a tetanus shot if you had your last shot more than five years ago.
- Your doctor will most likely want to check your wound again in one to two 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.

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 strange and sick animals.
- Leave animals alone while they're eating.
- Keep pets on a leash when you're out in public with them.
- Select your family pet carefully.

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.



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