

# HSS Safety Message



## Summer Safety Message Dog and Cat Bites

With the weather finally turning nice, more people are getting outside and enjoying the sunshine. And for a lot of people, that includes going for walks with their dog. But with more dogs venturing outside this time of year, that opens up the possibility of dog bites.



### How big is the problem?

- About 4.5 million people are bitten by dogs each year.
- Almost one in five of those who are bitten (a total of 885,000) require medical attention for dog bite-related injuries.
- In 2006, more than 31,000 people underwent reconstructive surgery as a result of being bitten by dogs.

### Who is most at risk?

- **Children:** Among children, the rate of dog bite-related injuries is highest for those ages 5 to 9 years, and children are more likely than adults to receive medical attention for dog bites than adults. Recent research shows that the rate of dog-bite related injuries among children seems to be decreasing.
- **Adult Males:** Among adults, males are more likely than females to be bitten.
- **People with dogs in their homes:** Among children and adults, having a dog in the household is associated with a higher incidence of dog bites. As the number of dogs in the home increases, so does the incidence of dog bites. Adults with two or more dogs in the household

are five times more likely to be bitten than those living without dogs at home.

### How can I prevent cat and dog bites?

Dog bites are a largely preventable public health problem, and adults and children can learn to reduce their chances of being bitten. 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 are 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.

### What should I do if I am bitten by a dog or cat?

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 shaded box below).
- Wash the wound gently with soap and water.
- Apply pressure with a clean towel to the injured area to stop any 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, the animal control office or the 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 a 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.)
- You were bitten by a wild animal or a domestic animal (such as a pet) of unknown immunization status.

### Cat Bites:

Cats have teeth. Cats have sharp teeth. A cat will bite when it's upset. A cat will bite hard when it's very upset. Cat bites hurt. Cat bites can get infected quickly.



All of these statements are true. This can happen, obviously, even if you do know what to do. Statistics show that 80 percent of all cat bites get infected. The most frequent type of bite is a puncture wound. If a cat bite bleeds fairly well, your chance of infection will be greatly reduced. The bleeding actually flushes some of the infectious saliva out of the wound. But, with their rather long pointed teeth, a cat bite is more frequently a puncture that doesn't bleed very much, or at all. These wounds can reach into joints and bones and introduce bacteria deeply into the tissue. Puncture wounds are very difficult to clean, so a lot of bacteria may be left in the wound. Also, most cat bites are to the hand, which makes infection more likely. If the bite is in a joint, such as a finger knuckle, your injury can prove to be even more serious with the possibility of inflammation and bone infection.

Statistics show that 80% of all cat bites get infected while only 3 to 18% of dog bites become infected if proper care is not taken.

Dogs have strong jaws—large dogs can exert more than 450 pounds of pressure per square inch—and

their teeth are relatively dull. So the wounds caused by dogs are usually crushing of the tissue bitten and lacerations or tearing of the skin rather than puncture wounds. Most dog bites do not penetrate deeply enough to get bacteria into bones, tendons, or joints, but they often do a lot of damage just from the trauma of the bite. Tissue that has been crushed, however, such as may occur with a bite to the hand, is particularly susceptible to infection. Dog bites often do more outright damage, but only 3 to 18 percent become infected.

### 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. 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.
- 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. 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.



**World Rabies Day September 28, 2009**

<http://www.worldrabiesday.org/EN/Education-Bank/english.html>