

The Risk of Infection from Cat Bites

Infection from cat bites represents a public health risk to pet owners. There are between 4 to 5 million cat and dog bites that are reported each year. The actual number is higher than those reported, so this should be considered a relatively common experience. Even the most innocent penetration from a feline bite should be taken seriously.

Dog bites are more common and have the potential for causing more tissue damage; however, cat bites are far more likely to become infected. In a research study, the bacteria *Pasteurella multocida* is most commonly isolated.

An interesting part of the research study demonstrated that an extremely high percentage of cats carry this organism in their mouth. Animals from humane shelters, veterinary clinics and private homes were tested and about 90% were positive for this bacterium. The cats that were tested were free of symptoms and appeared healthy on physical exams.

There was no correlation between sex, age, food type or lifestyle. I would have imagined that older cats with advanced periodontal disease would have posed the greatest risk, however, the organism that caused infection was found to be present almost equally in the feline population. Simply stated, we must consider all felines as potential carriers and treat any penetration of the skin as a potential health risk.

Another interesting finding was that *Pasteurella multocida* is not picked up randomly or caused by an unsanitary condition in the environment. It is probably acquired via transfer from the mother to the kitten in the uterus.

The signs of infection can occur within hours after a bite wound occurs. When a cat bite occurs, it is strongly recommended to seek the advice of your physician as any cat or kitten can harbor the bacteria that can cause serious infections.