

# Animal and Human Bites

## How do bites occur?

Bites may occur:

- During routine tasks on a farm or ranch
- While you are walking, jogging, swimming, hiking, camping, or doing other outdoor activities
- During arguments or fights
- During intimate contact.

You may be bitten by:

- Wild, rabies-prone animals such as skunks, raccoons, foxes, or bats
- Small wild animals such as squirrels, mice, rats, rabbits, and chipmunks, which are usually free of rabies but can cause other illnesses, such as plague
- Domestic or stray dogs, which could have rabies
- Dogs, cats, or other pets or domestic animals, such as horses, which may cause serious wound infections
- Small indoor pets such as gerbils or hamsters, which are not likely to have rabies
- Other people, usually during fights.

Bites can happen when you are playing with a pet or trying to feed a wild animal. They may also happen even if you have not approached the animal.

Some animals, such as cats, have very sharp, pointy teeth that tend to cause puncture wounds. A puncture wound may not look like it is anything to worry about, but bacteria may have been pushed deep into the wound. Puncture wounds are hard to clean, so bacteria may be left in the wound. All bites can get infected, but these puncture wounds are more likely to get infected than some other kinds of animal bites.

Human bites happen more often than most people realize. Human bites are often more dangerous than animal bites because the human mouth has more bacteria in it than most animals' mouths. It is very easy for a human bite to become infected. However, any bite that breaks the skin can become infected and should be treated by your healthcare provider.

## What are the symptoms?

Bites may cause:

- Puncture wounds
- Deep cuts
- Scrapes in the skin
- Bruises, with possibly a puncture or cut visible in the center of the bruised area

- Bleeding.

If the bite becomes infected, signs of infection include redness, pain, swelling, and pus. You may also have swollen glands or a fever and feel sick. These symptoms often mean you have a serious infection, especially if you have red streaks on the skin around the wound.

## **How are they diagnosed?**

Your healthcare provider will look at the bitten area. Your provider will ask how the bite happened to see if you need more tests. For example, your provider will ask if you knew the animal and if the animal seemed to be acting normally. If the bite is deep and your bone could have been damaged or is at risk of getting infected, you may have X-rays. Bone infections can be very serious and hard to treat.

Some animals such as snakes or spiders inject venom into the skin, which can cause illness and even death. It can be very helpful to your healthcare provider if you know what type of animal has bitten you.

## **How are they treated?**

Treatment depends on how you were bitten and how badly you are injured.

Follow these first aid measures for all bites that break the skin:

- If the bite has caused a very serious life or limb-threatening injury, call 911 for emergency help.
- Control bleeding by putting pressure on the wound. Don't use a tourniquet. If you have bleeding that you cannot stop, call 911 or go to a nearby hospital for treatment.
- If you don't think you need emergency help, wash the area with mild soap and water. Wash your hands well with soap and water before and after you touch the area.
- Put a clean bandage on the wound. If the bandage gets wet or dirty, wash the area and put on a clean bandage as soon as possible.
- See your healthcare provider for treatment if the bite is large or deep and causes bleeding.

In all cases of animal bites, call your healthcare provider. Your provider may suggest that you:

- Have a tetanus shot within 48 hours if you haven't had one in the last 5 years.
- Put antibiotic ointment on the bite.
- Take acetaminophen or nonprescription anti-inflammatory medicine such as ibuprofen if the bite is painful.
- Take antibiotics to prevent infection. Follow the directions exactly. Take the medicine until it is completely gone. Don't stop taking it just because you feel better.
- Have stitches or surgical repair, depending on how large or deep the bite is, where it is, and whether the bleeding has stopped.

- Report the bite to authorities (animal control) if you were bitten by an animal that might carry rabies. Your provider will determine if you need rabies shots.

In all cases of human bites, call your healthcare provider right away. Don't wait a day or two to see your provider. These bites get infected even more often than animal bites and can cause serious infections.

### **How long will the effects last?**

The time it takes for wounds to heal depends on the extent of the damage and your overall state of health. If the bite is infected, the infection will usually heal in 7 to 10 days with treatment.

A deep bite may cause scarring. It might damage nearby nerves.

### **How can I take care of myself?**

- Follow your healthcare provider's instructions for care of the wound.
- Tell your healthcare provider if:
  - Your symptoms are getting worse even though you have been taking antibiotics for 1 to 2 days.
  - The bitten area gets redder or more painful or swollen.
  - You see red streaks spreading from the bite toward the center of your body.
  - The area gets very warm to touch.
  - Pus or other fluid is draining from the bite.
  - You have swollen glands, a fever higher than 101.5°F (38.6°C), chills, nausea, vomiting, or muscle aches.
- Have a tetanus booster shot at least every 10 years.

### **What can be done to help prevent animal bites?**

Be aware of how animals act before they bite. For example, they may raise or flatten their ears, show their teeth, growl, or snarl. Don't approach or touch strange animals.

Use precautions to protect yourself from attack:

- Carry Mace or high-frequency sound repellents when you are walking or jogging
- Wear hiking boots or shoes that cover the ankle when you hike or camp
- Wear protective clothing when you participate in other outdoor activities.

To help protect others from animal bites you can:

- Make sure your pets get rabies shots.
- Keep your pets on a leash. Warn people that your dog may bite.
- Muzzle your pets if necessary when you are away from home.
- Keep your pets in enclosed and secure areas. Put up signs to warn people that your dog may bite.

If you see an animal behaving strangely or foaming at the mouth or if an animal has bitten someone:

- Report it to the local animal warden, animal control, or police.
- Tell the health department.
- Tell the pet's owner.

If you regularly handle animals that could have rabies, be sure to get shots of the rabies preexposure vaccine. This vaccine can help keep you from getting rabies if you are bitten.

Teach your children not to approach or touch strange animals.

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