

# Animal and Human Bites

Medical care is often needed for any wounds that breaks your child's skin, including human bites. Antibiotics may be needed to prevent potentially serious infections. Some bite wounds need stitches (sutures), depending on how severe they are and where they are located.

## What do you need to know about bite wounds?

Bite wounds are common in children. Children may be bitten by dogs, cats, or other animals. Human bites are also common, especially in preschoolers.

Unless your child's bite is very minor, it should be checked by a medical professional. Antibiotics may be needed to prevent infection with germs from a biting animal's mouth. Stitches may be needed for larger bites or bites located in certain areas, especially on the face. Teaching children some simple safety rules can prevent many animal bites.

## What do they look like?

- Dog bites may appear as scrapes (abrasions); puncture wounds, sometimes quite deep; or tears (lacerations). Bites from larger dogs and dogs of more aggressive breeds can be severe.
- Cat and rabbit bites are usually puncture wounds.
- Human bites can be puncture wounds when the upper and lower teeth come together on a body part. Another type of bite wound occurs in fights—the skin of the fist may be cut or torn when it comes in contact with the other person's teeth.
- Rodent (rats and gerbils) bites may also occur.

## What are some possible complications of bite wounds?

- *Infection* is the most common complication, whether the bite is caused by an animal or human. The germs causing infection differ, depending on the type of animal. Other important factors include the time since the bite, the depth of the bite, and whether there is any foreign matter in the wound.
- Although they are rare, there is a risk of certain serious infections such as tetanus and rabies. Rabies vaccine may be needed after bites by wild animals, especially rodents, or by stray dogs.
- *Scarring* or other healing-related complications may also occur. Medical evaluation is required to see if stitches are needed to close the wound.

## What puts your child at risk of bite wounds?

- Dog bites are most common in boys between the ages of 6 and 11. Most bites occur near home and involve a dog the child knows.
- Dogs are more likely to bite when a child is bothering them. This is especially true for mother dogs who are trying to protect their pups. However, some dogs may bite even when they are not being bothered.
- Serious dog bites are more likely to occur with certain breeds, for example, rottweilers and pit bulls.
- Cat bites occur more commonly in girls and usually involve a cat the child knows.
- Human bites are most commonly seen in preschool and early school-age children.
- Older children may suffer bite wounds when fighting.

## Can bite wounds be prevented?

Teach children some simple rules for safety around animals:

- Don't disturb animals that are sleeping or eating.
- Don't go near animals you don't know.
- Don't disturb mother dogs caring for their pups.
- If a dog starts chasing you, don't run.
- Let dogs see and sniff you before touching them.

Parents should not bring animals that may bite into the home. Avoid exotic pets and aggressive dog breeds.

## How are bite wounds treated?

- Any animal or human bite that breaks the skin requires medical attention. If your child is bitten, call our office or go to the emergency room.
- The doctor will examine the bite and ask about how it happened. Provide as much information as possible on the type of animal and the circumstances surrounding the bite.
- *Prevention of infection:*
  - The doctor will need to know whether your child has had a tetanus vaccination within the last 5 to 10 years. If not, a tetanus shot will be needed.
  - In human bites, it is important to know whether the child/person who bit your child is infected with hepatitis B virus or human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). If so, medications may be given to your child to prevent these infections.

- In dog or cat bites, it is important to know whether the animal has received rabies vaccine or if the animal was acting abnormally. Your child may need rabies shots if recommended by the local health department. Rabies shots may also be needed for bites from an unknown or wild animal (for example, a raccoon or a bat).
- The bite area should be cleansed and rinsed thoroughly to remove germs. If any skin has been torn, minor surgery may be needed to remove it.
- *Antibiotics.* Antibiotics are generally recommended for:
  - Puncture wounds.
  - Bites in certain areas (face, hands, feet, or genitals).
  - Any bite that is more than just a scrape.
  - Your child may receive antibiotics in oral form or in a shot. If oral antibiotics are given, make sure your child takes the full amount prescribed.
  - The choice of antibiotic depends on the type of biting animal and other factors. Make sure to tell the doctor if your child is allergic to penicillin.
- *Stitches and dressings:*
  - Stitches (sutures) may be recommended to close the wound. Factors affecting the need for stitches include the location of the bite, how long ago it happened, the risk of infection, and the size and depth of the bite.
  - Bites of the face or deep bite wounds may leave unsightly scars. The doctor may recommend a visit to a plastic surgeon or other specialist.
  - A dressing (bandage) will likely be placed on the wound. Follow the doctor's instructions regarding changing the dressing and keeping the wound clean.
  - Get follow-up care within a day or two, or as recommended by the doctor.



### **When should I call your office?**

Call our office if any of the following occurs:

- Severe pain.
- Fever.
- Redness or swelling at or near the area of the bite.
- Pus draining from the bite.