



Cat-Scratch Disease

What is “cat-scratch disease” (CSD) or “cat-scratch fever”?

Cat-Scratch Disease, sometimes also known as Cat Scratch Fever, is a bacterial disease caused by *Bartonella henselae*. Most people with CSD have been bitten or scratched by a cat and developed a mild infection at the point of injury.

What cats are more likely to carry the disease and how do cats become infected?

Cats less than a year of age and/or cats infested with fleas are the most likely animals to carry *B. henselae* bacteria. Kittens are more likely to be infected and to pass the disease to people. About 40% of cats have *B. henselae* at some time during their lives. Cats with *B. henselae* often do not have any signs of illness, so you cannot predict which cats can spread the disease to you. People who are more likely to have complications of CSD include those with weakened immune systems, such as those undergoing chemotherapy, organ transplant patients, and people with HIV/AIDS. Although *B. henselae* has been found in fleas, there is no evidence that a bite from an infected flea can spread CSD.

What are the symptoms of this disease in humans?

The first symptoms are often redness and swelling at the site of the injury. This is generally accompanied by fever, headache, muscle soreness, poor appetite and fatigue. Within 2 weeks, a lymph node in the area of the bite or scratch becomes very swollen and painful and may ulcerate and drain fluid. Although uncomfortable, most cases will resolve without specific medical treatment in 4-6 weeks. However, in persons with severe immune system deficiencies, particularly HIV infection, the disease can be severe and even fatal. Disease complications in those with weakened immune systems include systemic infection and conditions affecting the liver, spleen, or skin.

What is the treatment for cat-scratch disease in humans?

Cat-scratch disease is usually a self-limiting illness that does not require antibiotic treatment. For patients experiencing severe complications of *B. henselae* infection, antibiotics may be prescribed by a physician.

What can I do to prevent cat-scratch disease?

The best way to avoid this illness is to protect yourself from cat scratches and bites and to avoid contact of open wounds with cat saliva. If a bite or scratch occurs, rapid and thorough cleansing of the wound with soap or disinfectant may help prevent illness. Cat owners are encouraged to keep their pets indoors and practice good flea control. Trimming nails or declawing may also help to decrease the risk of scratches and subsequent exposure to *Bartonella henselae*.

Can I test my cat to see if it is a carrier?

The bacteria can be grown in blood culture and there is a specific blood serum test; however, these are primarily used in research and are not practical or economical for general use. Antibiotic treatment of carrier cats does not ensure elimination of the bacteria from their system, but in some cases treatment may be recommended.

If someone develops cat-scratch disease after coming into contact with my cat, do I need to get rid of my cat?

This is generally not necessary or recommended unless a person with a severely weakened immune system is in frequent contact with the cat. Nail trimming and good flea control should be practiced.