



Advertisement



AAOS
AMERICAN ACADEMY OF
ORTHOPAEDIC SURGEONS

OrthoInfo

Your connection to expert orthopaedic information

[Find an Orthopaedist](#)

[AAOS.org](#)

- Home
- About Us
- Glossary
- Español
- Videos & Multimedia
- Resources
- For Physicians

Animal Bites

Like 9 Tweet Print Article

Each year millions of people in the United States are bitten by animals. Most bites occur on the fingers of the dominant hand, but animal bites can also occur about the head and neck area.

Cause

Most animal bites are from dogs. Cat bites are the second most common cause of bites. The risk of infection from a cat bite is much higher than a bite from a dog.

A major concern about an animal bite is the possibility of rabies. Because most pets in the United States are vaccinated, most cases of rabies result from the bite of a wild animal, such as a skunk, bat, or raccoon. Only a few people die from rabies in the United States each year, and most deaths are due to bat bites. In other countries, dog bites are the most common source of rabies. Rabies causes an estimated 55,000 deaths worldwide each year.

[Top of page](#)

Symptoms

Even if a bite does not break the skin, it may cause crushing and tearing injury to underlying bone, muscles, tendons, ligaments and nerves. If the skin is broken, there is the additional possibility of infection.

Signs of an infection include:

- Warmth around the wound
- Swelling
- Pain
- Discharge of pus
- Redness around a puncture wound

Signs of damage to tendons or nerves include:

- An inability to bend or straighten the finger
- A loss of feeling over the tip of the finger

[Top of page](#)

Diagnosis

A physician should be contacted and told how the bite was received and to ask what treatment is needed. The physician will wash the wound area thoroughly and check for signs of nerve or tendon damage. The arm may be examined to see whether there are signs of a spreading infection.

[Top of page](#)

Treatment

Immediate First Aid

The bitten area should not be put into the mouth. The mouth contains bacteria, which can cause infection.

Superficial Wounds

For superficial wounds, the area should be washed thoroughly with soap and water or an antiseptic, such as hydrogen peroxide or alcohol. An antibiotic ointment should be applied and the wound should be covered with a nonstick bandage.

The area should be watched carefully for signs of damaged nerves or tendons. Some bruising may develop. The wound should heal within a week to 10 days. If it does not, or if there are signs

Parts of the Body

- Shoulder & Elbow
- Hand & Wrist
- Hip & Thigh
- Knee & Lower Leg
- Foot & Ankle
- Neck & Back

Health Centers

- Broken Bones & Injuries
- Diseases & Conditions
- Arthritis
- Tumors
- Sports Injuries & Prevention
- Children
- Bone Health
- Health & Safety

Treatment

- Treatments & Surgeries
- Joint Replacement
- Rehabilitation Exercise and Conditioning Handouts

Your Healthcare

- Patient Safety
- Patient Stories
- Resources

of infection or damage to nerves and tendons, medical help should be sought.

Presence of Bleeding

Direct pressure should be applied to the area using a clean dry cloth and the area should be elevated. If an area is not actively bleeding, it should not be cleaned.

The wound should be covered with a clean sterile dressing and medical attention should be sought.

If the wound is to the face, head, or neck, medical help should be sought immediately.

Medical assistance

The physician will probably leave the wound open (without stitches), unless there is a facial wound. Xrays and a blood test may be needed. A tetanus shot and a prescription for antibiotics may be prescribed.

If the tendons or nerves have been injured, a specialist may be consulted for additional treatment.

The incident should be reported to the public health department. They may ask for assistance in locating the animal. This is so that the animal can be confined and observed for symptoms of rabies.

[Top of page](#)

Last reviewed: July 2009



Co-developed with the American Society for Surgery of the Hand

AAOS does not endorse any treatments, procedures, products, or physicians referenced herein. This information is provided as an educational service and is not intended to serve as medical advice. Anyone seeking specific orthopaedic advice or assistance should consult his or her orthopaedic surgeon, or locate one in your area through the AAOS "Find an Orthopaedist" program on this website.