
What Is Cat Scratch Disease?

When you are bitten or scratched by a cat, germs (*Bartonella* bacteria) may get into your body through the broken skin. This can make you sick. Cat scratch disease is often not a serious illness. For most people, it goes away on its own.

What causes cat scratch disease?

As many as half of all cats carry a bacterium that causes cat scratch disease. Cats carrying these bacteria aren't sick. But they can spread the bacteria to people. Kittens are more likely to spread the disease than adult cats. Children are more likely to get cat scratch disease than adults. The germ passes from cats to people when:

- An infected cat's saliva enters the body through a bite or scratch or the cat licks an open wound.
- You pet a cat with these bacteria on its fur and then rub your eyes.
- You get a fleabite from a cat's litter.

What are the symptoms of cat scratch disease?

The symptoms of cat scratch disease are often mild. They can include:

- A sore or blister at the site of the scratch or bite.
- A swollen lymph node or nodes (sometimes called a swollen gland) near the site of the scratch or bite. For example, if you are scratched on the arm, a lymph node in your armpit may swell up.
- Oozing from swollen lymph nodes.
- Fever.
- Headache.
- Feeling tired or unwell.
- Loss of appetite.

How is cat scratch disease treated?

Most people with cat scratch disease will get better without medicine. Most treatments for cat scratch disease focus on easing symptoms. Treatments may include:

- **Warm compresses.** These are applied to the swollen lymph node. They can help the swelling go down.
- **Over-the-counter pain medicines.** These include acetaminophen or ibuprofen. These can help with mild pain. Never give aspirin to anyone younger than 18 years of age who is ill with a viral infection or fever. It may cause severe liver or brain damage.

- **Antibiotics.** These medicines may prevent or stop the spread of the infection if your body is not able to fight the disease well. They may also help shrink swollen lymph nodes.
- **Draining a lymph node.** If a lymph node is very large or painful or not getting better with treatment over time, your doctor may drain it to help relieve the pain.

How can you prevent cat scratch disease?

Here are some ways that you and your family can prevent cat scratch disease:

- Don't play roughly with cats. Teach your children to play gently with all animals. This helps prevent getting bitten or scratched.
- Don't let your cat lick you, especially around the mouth, nose, eyes, or open wounds.
- Wash your hands after handling a cat. Have your children do the same.
- Talk with your veterinarian about how to keep fleas away from your cat and your family.
- Don't have a kitten in your home if you have a weakened immune system. Kittens pose an extra risk for you if, for example, you have HIV or are being treated for cancer. Take extra care to prevent cat bites and scratches.
- Keep cats indoors and away from stray cats.
- If you're planning to adopt a cat, consider a cat that is at least 1 year old. Cats younger than 1 year of age are more likely to have CSD.

What are the complications of cat scratch disease?

The symptoms of cat scratch disease often go away on their own. But the infection may spread in people who have a weakened immune system. If this happens, cat scratch disease is more serious. It can lead to long-lasting fever, vision changes, severe muscle pain, headache, or confusion. This is uncommon.

When should you contact your doctor?

Contact your health care provider right away if:

- You have a fever of 100.4°F (38°C) or higher, or as advised by your provider.
- You have pain that gets worse, especially muscle pain or a headache.
- Your symptoms don't get better in 1 or 2 weeks, or they get worse.
- You have confusion or sleepiness.
- You have vision changes or nervous system symptoms.