

What is cat scratch fever?

Cat scratch fever, also known as cat scratch disease, is caused by the bacteria *Bartonella henselae*, which is transmitted to cats by fleas or infected cats. Cats can carry the bacteria without becoming ill and can pass the disease to humans. Most people with cat scratch fever have been bitten or scratched by a cat and developed a mild infection at the point of injury.

Who is at risk for cat scratch fever?

Cat scratch fever can affect anyone, but is most common in children younger than 15 years of age. Most patients report a history of a cat bite, lick, or scratch. Kittens are more likely to be infected and to pass the bacteria on to people. Children younger than five years and people who have compromised immune systems are more likely to have complications of the disease.

What are the symptoms of cat scratch fever?

Symptoms of cat scratch fever may include fever, headache, malaise, poor appetite, fatigue, and a raised, red lesion or pustule at the site of the cat scratch or bite. Days to weeks later, the lymph nodes closest to the site where the bacteria entered the body may become swollen, tender, or painful. Rarely, serious complications involving the brain, eyes, heart, or other organs can occur.

How soon do symptoms appear?

The raised lesion or pustule usually appears within three to 14 days after exposure. Swollen lymph nodes generally appear between five to 50 days after the appearance of the primary lesion or pustule.

How is cat scratch fever spread?

The bacteria is transmitted to cats by fleas. A cat may also become infected by fighting with an infected cat. Cat scratch fever is spread to people when an infected cat bites or scratches a person hard enough to break the skin or licks an open wound.

When and for how long is a person able to spread the disease?

Cat scratch fever is not spread from person-to-person.

How is a person diagnosed?

Laboratory tests can detect the disease in a blood sample.

What is the treatment?

Cat scratch fever generally resolves on its own within two to four months without any treatment. Antibiotics may be recommended for more severe cases or for people with compromised immune systems.

Does past infection make a person immune?

No.

Should children or others be excluded from child care, school, work or other activities if they have cat scratch fever?

No. Cat scratch fever is not spread from person-to-person. If a child is too ill to participate in normal activities or if fever and behavior change are noted, then he/she should be excluded from child care or school.

What can be done to prevent the spread of cat scratch fever?

- Avoid cat scratches or bites, especially from young cats.
- Immunocompromised people should avoid cats younger than one year and stray cats.
- Wash cat bites and scratches immediately with soap and running water.
- Do not allow cats to lick your open wounds.
- Do not pet or touch stray or feral cats.
- Vacuum frequently to control fleas in your home.
- Keep your cat's nails trimmed.
- Keep cats indoors to decrease the risk of infection from fleas or potentially infected animals.
- Protect your cat's health by scheduling routine veterinary health check-ups.
- Consult your veterinarian for more information on flea prevention.

Additional Information

For additional information, call the North Dakota Department of Health at 800.472.2180.

Resources:

1. *Red Book: 2015 Report of the Committee on Infectious Diseases*. 30th ed. [Children in Out-Of-Home Care]. Kimberlin, DW; Brady, MT; Jackson, MA; Long, SS. American Academy of Pediatrics. 2015: 132-151.
2. *Red Book: 2015 Report of the Committee on Infectious Diseases*. 30th ed. [Cat-Scratch Disease]. Kimberlin, DW; Brady, MT; Jackson, MA; Long, SS. American Academy of Pediatrics. 2015: 280-283.
3. Heymann, D. L. (2015). *Control of Communicable Diseases Manual, 20th Edition*. Cat Scratch Disease. American Public Health Association. 2015: 95-96.
4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2016). Bartonella Infection. www.cdc.gov/bartonella.