

Animal and Human Bites

How do bites occur?

Bites may occur:

- during routine tasks on a farm or ranch
- while you are walking, jogging, swimming, hiking, camping, or doing other outdoor activities
- during arguments or fights
- during intimate contact.

You may be bitten by:

- wild, rabies-prone animals such as skunks, raccoons, foxes, or bats
- small wild animals such as squirrels, mice, rats, rabbits, and chipmunks, which are usually free of rabies but can cause other illnesses, such as plague
- domestic or stray dogs, which can have rabies
- dogs, cats, or other pets or domestic animals, such as horses, which may cause serious wound infections
- small indoor pets such as gerbils or hamsters, which are not likely to have rabies
- other people, usually during fights.

Bites may result from an unprovoked attack by an animal, but they can also happen when you are playing with a pet or trying to feed a wild animal.

Human bites occur more often than most people realize. Because they can lead to more serious complications and greater risk of infection, human bites are often more dangerous than animal bites. However, any bite that breaks the skin can become infected and should be treated by your healthcare provider.

What are the symptoms?

Bites may cause:

- breaks in the skin
- puncture wounds
- deep cuts
- bruises, with possibly a puncture or cut visible in the center of the bruised area
- bleeding.

Signs of infection are redness, pain, swelling, and pus.

How are they diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will look at the bitten area. Your provider will ask how the bite happened to see if you need more tests. You may have X-rays if the bite is deep and your bone could have been damaged.

Some animals such as snakes or spiders inject venom into the skin, which can cause illness and even death. It can be helpful to your healthcare provider if you know what type of animal has bitten you.

How are they treated?

Treatment depends on how you were bitten and how badly you are injured.

Follow these first aid measures for all bites that break the skin:

If the bite has caused a very serious life or limb threatening injury or you are losing a lot of blood, call 911 for emergency help.

Control bleeding by putting pressure on the wound. Do not apply a tourniquet. If you have bleeding that you can't stop, call 911 or go to a hospital for treatment.

If you don't think you need emergency help, wash the area with mild soap and water.

Put a clean bandage over the wound.

In all cases of animal bites, call your healthcare provider. Your provider may suggest that you:

Have a tetanus shot if you haven't had one in the last 5 years.

Put antibiotic ointment on the bite.

Take antibiotics to prevent infection. (Be sure to tell your provider if you know you are allergic to antibiotics.)

Have stitches or surgical repair, depending on how large or deep the bite is, where it is, and whether the bleeding has stopped.

Report the bite to authorities if you were bitten by an animal that might carry rabies. Your provider will determine if you need rabies shots.

In all cases of human bites, call your healthcare provider right away. Do not wait a day or two to see your provider. These bites become infected even more often than animal bites and can cause serious problems.

How long will the effects last?

The time it takes for wounds to heal depends on the extent of the damage and your overall state of health. If the bite is infected, the infection will usually heal in 7 to 10 days with treatment.

A deep bite may cause scarring. It might damage nearby nerves.

How can I take care of myself?

Follow your healthcare provider's instructions for care of the wound.

Tell your healthcare provider if:

- Your symptoms are getting worse even though you have been taking antibiotics for 1 to 2 days.
- The bitten area becomes painful, swollen, or red.
- You see red streaks from the bite toward the center of your body.
- Pus is draining from the bite.
- You have swollen glands, a fever, or other symptoms of infection.

Have a tetanus booster shot at least every 10 years.

What can be done to help prevent animal and human bites?

Be alert to the possibility of animal bites. Learn how animals act before they bite, such as raising their ears, baring their teeth, or barking.

Use precautions to protect yourself from attack when you are:

walking or jogging (carry Mace or high-frequency sound repellents)
hiking or camping (wear hiking boots or shoes that cover the ankle)
participating in other outdoor activities (wear protective clothing).

Also be aware when you swim in oceans or lakes.

To help protect others from animal bites you can:

Make sure your pets get rabies shots.
Keep your pets on a leash.
Muzzle your pets if necessary when you are away from home.
Keep your pets in enclosed and secure areas.

If you see an animal behaving strangely or foaming at the mouth or if an animal has bitten someone:

Report it to the local animal warden or police.
Notify the health department.
Notify the pet's owner.

Teach your children not to approach or touch strange animals.

Published by McKesson Corporation.

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Adult Health Advisor