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ANIMAL BITES

What is it? Wounds caused by the teeth of another cat or dog can occur as a result of play, social disagreements, or hunting behavior.

Who gets it? Among cats, unneutered males that are allowed outdoors unsupervised are at highest risk, because they will fight over territory with other cats. Dogs of any age or sex who visit dog parks or are allowed to run off leash may have opportunities to get into fights with other dogs. Some of the most serious bites occur between adult dogs of the same household, over food, toys, or social status. Cats and small breed dogs may be the victims of hunting behavior on the part of larger dogs.

What are the clinical signs? Sometimes wounds are visible on the skin. In some cases, the haircoat hides the skin wounds, and the injury is not discovered until an infection develops. Bite wounds may also cause internal injuries that lead to weakness and lethargy.

How is it diagnosed? In many cases, the bite was witnessed by the owners. In other cases, the veterinarian may be able to recognize the characteristics of a bite wound based on physical exam.

How is it treated? Both dog and cat bites can be very serious, for different reasons. Bite wounds from dogs, especially large ones, may show little damage to the skin while causing very serious injury to the tissue underneath. In many cases, it is necessary for the patient to be anesthetized so that the wound can be surgically explored in order to remove any contamination and repair any serious injury. Because the damaged tissue under the skin is very susceptible to infection, it may be necessary to place a drain in the wound or to treat with antibiotics. Cat bites tend to take the form of deep punctures, causing less physical trauma, but they will be contaminated with the bacteria that normally inhabit a cat's mouth, and can very quickly result in deep, serious infections. Deep flushing and antibiotics may be used to control infection. Veterinarians may need to culture the wounds or do other tests such as x-rays or blood tests to look for internal injuries. Home care, such as cleaning the skin or applying ointment, is rarely adequate.

What is the aftercare? Pain medications, antibiotics and anti-inflammatories may need to be given at home. If the wound has a drain placed in it, it will need to be protected and monitored for several days. This may require bandage changes or the use of an e-collar to prevent licking or chewing. The skin must be kept very clean and dry. The patient must be kept away from dirty or muddy areas, and may need to have its activity restricted. Warm compresses are sometimes helpful to encourage fluid drainage from the wound. When wounds have been closed, the patient must be prevented from licking them, and the wounds must be monitored for increasing swelling, redness or drainage that might indicate an infection.

What is the prognosis? Most bite wounds heal very well if treated quickly and appropriately. If the wound is not discovered or treated until after an infection sets in, treatment becomes more complicated. Severe bite wounds can cause life-threatening injury, especially if made by dogs with powerful jaws. Cats or small dogs that have been bitten and shaken may be in grave danger. It is also possible for bite wounds to transmit very serious diseases such as FIV or rabies for which there is no effective treatment.