Will a healthy dog's bite make me sick? [1]

Hi Alice,

Are dog bites severe if you know the dog had all of its shots and is healthy? If I wash the cut properly and put some rubbing alcohol on it and keep it clean and dry, will I be ok?

signed, dog bitten

Answer

Dear dog bitten,

So sorry to hear about your too-close encounter with a dog!

The answer to your question is: it depends. Some studies show that people who have been bitten often underestimate the severity of the wound. Even though a bite may appear small, an animal's pointy teeth can cause a surprisingly deep wound, and it may be difficult to clean such a wound thoroughly in order to avoid infection (this is particularly true of cat bites).

You'll definitely want to seek medical care immediately if:

- You've been bitten by a wild animal.
- You've been bitten by a cat.
- You don't know whether the animal that bit you is up-to-date on its shots.
- You've been bitten on your hands, face, head, or feet. Bites on the face or head may pose cosmetic issues; bites to the hands or feet have a higher risk of injuring the important nerves, tendons, or ligaments that can affect functioning.
- You have a medical condition that might weaken your immune system (such as diabetes, cancer, HIV, liver or lung disease).
- It's been over five years since your last tetanus shot. Tetanus shots should always be kept up-to-date, and should be given within 24 hours of any skin puncture.

It's reasonable to call your health care provider for advice on whether or not to treat the injury yourself. S/he may listen to your description of the wound and tell you that it is fine to treat this yourself. Wash it thoroughly with mild soap and comfortably warm water, allowing the warm running water to wash over the cut for about five minutes. You may be advised to apply antibiotic ointment to the area two to three times each day.

If the wound seems particularly deep, it may require irrigation (large amounts of warm water}
carefully squirted into the wound to clean it out extremely thoroughly) by your health care provider. Some animal bites are better left unstitched, even if they are quite deep, in order to lessen the chance of closing in an infection. Other wounds (tearing injuries or very deep punctures) may need stitches to bring the edges together. If you haven't had a tetanus shot within the last five years, you'll need a booster.

Keep a close eye on the bite. Try to keep it elevated above the level of your heart for several days to prevent or decrease swelling. Watch for redness, swelling, or pus (these are signs of infection). Also be on the lookout for headache, fever, or muscle aches, which may indicate a serious infection. If any of these symptoms develop, call your health care provider back immediately, or go straight to an emergency care facility.

You mentioned that the dog that bit you had had all of its shots. Animals that haven't had all of their shots have to be observed for ten days for signs of rabies developing. If an animal had rabies, or if you had gotten bitten by a wild animal that couldn't be examined for rabies, you would need to get a series of five or six rabies shots. In that case, your health care provider decides where it will be best to administer these shots. Rabies shots used to be given in the stomach, and were considered to be particularly painful. To date, they have been vastly improved. Often, the first is given in the area of the animal bite, and the others can be given in the arms or buttocks. Most people find them to be about as painful as any other type of immunization. Unpleasant, but necessary; that's why it's so important for pet owners to be sure their dog's shots are up-to-date.

Hope you heal quickly and completely!

Alice!

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