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,

Whether it's a Chihuahua or a Great Dane, the answer is: it depends. People who've been bitten by an animal often underestimate the severity and depth of the wound. Even though a bite may appear small, an animal's pointy teeth might cause a surprisingly deep wound, and it may be difficult to thoroughly clean such a wound to avoid infection (this is particularly true of cat bites). So, what might your next steps be? Read on!

It's reasonable to call a health care provider for advice on whether or not to treat the injury yourself. They may listen to your description of the wound and determine if it's fine to treat it on your own. You may be advised to wash it thoroughly with mild soap and comfortably warm water, allowing the warm running water to wash over the cut for about five minutes. They also may recommend that you 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.

It's best to seek medical attention immediately if:

- You've been bitten by a wild animal.
- You've been bitten by a cat. All animals contain a variety of bacteria in their mouths, but cat bites tend to have a high risk of infection.
- 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 nerves, tendons, or ligaments that may affect motor functioning.
• You think you may have muscle, nerve, or other serious damage.
• You apply pressure to the wound and it doesn’t stop bleeding after 15 minutes.
• You think the wound may be infected, meaning that the wound swells, turns red, oozes pus, feels warm, or you develop a fever, chills, or muscle aches.
• You have a medical condition that may weaken your immune system (such as diabetes, cancer, HIV, liver disease, or lung disease).
• It's been over five years since your last tetanus shot \(^2\). A health care provider may give you a booster shot if this is the case.

It’s crucial to watch out for signs of infection because the bacteria from an animal bite may not only lead to an infected wound, but a serious systemic infection as well. Try to keep the affected area elevated above the level of your heart for several days to prevent or decrease swelling. As mentioned, if you observe redness, swelling, or pus, and especially if you develop a headache, fever, or muscle aches, it’s best call a health care provider immediately, or go straight to an emergency care facility.

Finally, knowing the vaccination status of the animal that bit you helps determine whether rabies is a risk. 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 been bitten by a wild animal that couldn’t be examined for rabies, you may need to get a series of five or six rabies shots over two weeks. Often, the first shot is given in the area of the animal bite, and the others are 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 critical for pet owners to be sure their pets’ shots are up-to-date.

Hope you heal quickly and completely!

Alice!

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