

First Aid for Animal Bites

The most common animal bites in the United States are from dogs, cats and other humans in that order. Less common, but often more dangerous, are bites from skunks, raccoons, bats and other animals that live in the wild. The health risks of an animal bite depends on the animal and how severe the bite is. Risks include:

- Rabies - a serious and often fatal viral infection of the central nervous system. The virus is transmitted to humans through the saliva of the infected animal. (Only warm-blooded animals can carry rabies.)
- Poison - from these snakes: rattlesnake, copperhead, coral, and water moccasin; from spiders - the worst ones being black widows, tarantulas and the brown recluse.
- Bleeding
- Infection
- Lyme Disease - a bacterial infection spread by deer tick bites
- Lockjaw - painful, persistent stiffness of the jaw due to a toxin which can be prevented with up-to-date tetanus immunizations

In the United States, particularly in the northeastern states, skunks, raccoons, bats and foxes are the main carriers of rabies.

Most house pets, though, are vaccinated for rabies and are unlikely to carry the virus.

Rabid animals can show these signs:

- strange behavior such as activity by day for animals that are normally active by night
- agitation, lack of fear of humans
- foaming at the mouth

Anti-venom treatment is available for poisonous snake bites at emergency medical facilities. It needs to be given within four hours after the bite.

Prevention

Here are some ways to prevent animal bites:

- Never leave a small child alone with a dog or cat, even if it's a puppy or kitten. Teething as well as excited pets have been known to bite.
- Teach children not to tease an animal. Tell them not to wave sticks, throw stones or pull a tail.
- Do not move suddenly or scream around an animal. Don't rush up to a dog until you know for sure that it is friendly. Sudden movements and loud noises can scare animals and cause them to attack.
- Leave pet dogs and cats alone while they are eating or sleeping.
- Do not feed wild animals with your hands.
- Do not pick up a sick or injured animal.
- Do not run from a strange dog.
- Do not keep wild animals as pets.
- Wear heavy boots when walking in areas snakes live.

To prevent Lyme Disease:

- Wear long pants tucked into socks and long-sleeve shirts when walking through fields and forests, when camping, hiking and the like. (Light colored, tightly woven clothing is best.)

- Inspect for ticks after these activities.