

Diseases from Pets

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Diseases that can be acquired through animals are called zoonoses. Here is a brief description of the more interesting and common diseases that can be transmitted by cats and dogs, including rabies, pasteurella, salmonella, and ringworm. This is not a complete list, however.

Rabies is a viral disease that very rapidly produces acute illness of the central nervous system or brain. It can cause problems like paralysis, anxiety, dysphagia (difficulty in swallowing), seizure, and death. It is usually transmitted through a bite from an infected animal, but not all animals commonly get rabies. Among wild animals, the most important potential sources for infection are raccoons, bats, skunks, and foxes.

There have been only a couple of cases of animal rabies reported in San Mateo County in the last several years. This is not true for other nearby counties, however. Marin and Contra Costa Counties have each reported dozens of cases in recent years. If you think that you have been bitten by an animal that has rabies, then you need to contact your physician immediately because treatment needs to be started **before** symptoms begin.

Prevention: Stay away from bats, skunks, raccoons, and foxes. Do not approach wild or aggressive cats or dogs. Do not provoke or attempt to capture any wild animal, and stay away from dead animals as well. Even if dead animals can't bite you, some of their blood or saliva may carry the virus; if you have an open wound, the disease can be transmitted through contact with the dead animal.

Pasteurella is a bacteria that causes a skin infection called cellulitis. Usually it is caused by a bite or scratch. Deep puncture wounds are more likely to cause this kind of infection and are much more commonly seen with cat bites than with dog bites. If you get a puncture wound from an animal or wounds that break the skin, you should contact your doctor.

Prevention: Do not pet wild or aggressive cats or dogs. Wash any bite or scratch thoroughly with soap and water.

Salmonella is a bacteria that causes stomach and intestinal problems like diarrhea, vomiting, stomach pain, and fever. This can be transmitted by contact with cat or dog feces. It's probably more common to be exposed through raw chicken, raw turkey, or raw eggs. Most cases are uncomplicated and usually go away with out medical treatment. Antibiotics are not usually needed, although for more severe cases of the disease, antibiotics can sometimes be useful.

Prevention: Wash your hands after petting animals and especially after cleaning up animal feces.

Campylobacter is another bacteria that can cause intestinal infection. The problems it causes include diarrhea, stomach pain, and fever. There may be blood in the stool as well. It is transmitted through infected stools and can be carried by people as well as cats, dogs, hamsters, and birds (including chickens and turkeys). Antibiotics are useful in treating infected people.

Prevention: Wash your hands after petting animals and especially after cleaning up their feces.

Toxoplasmosis is a parasite that can be transmitted by cat feces. It's potentially harmful

to a developing fetus, causing deformities, birth defects, or miscarriage, especially in the first trimester. It is recommended that pregnant women do not change a cat's litter box during the first trimester.

Cat Scratch Disease is caused by a bacteria that can be transmitted in a scratch, and it's more common in exposure to young kittens. This disease can cause gland enlargement and fever. It can, in unusual cases, cause more serious problems. The disease is usually self-resolving, but in more serious cases antibiotics can be helpful.

Prevention: Wash any scratches or bites immediately.

Giardia is a parasite that is passed by contaminated water or food. Symptoms include diarrhea, abdominal pain, flatulence, abdominal bloating, and loss of appetite. People can become infected directly from feces or from drinking water that has become contaminated with infected feces. Some people infected with giardia have no symptoms. The treatment is antibiotics.

Prevention: Wash your hands after changing diapers. Hikers, backpackers, and campers should avoid drinking directly from creeks, streams, rivers, or lakes. Make efforts to boil or treat water before drinking it or using it to prepare foods.

Ringworm, or tinea, is a skin rash caused by a fungus. It is often circular or oval in shape and has a raised border along the edge of the circle, hence the name "ring" worm. It can be red and also scaly. The rash is often itchy. Most commonly it is transmitted by another infected human, but cats and dogs can transmit the *Microsporum* and *Trichophyton* species of the fungus, which is transmitted through direct contact. Ringworm can be treated using over-the-counter antifungal creams like clotrimazole or miconazole. Since fungus infections are slow growing, they are also very slow to resolve. The rash might clear up after two weeks of treatment, but it is recommended that the creams be used for at least four weeks.

Prevention: Wash your hands thoroughly after contact with animals.

Scabies is an intensely itchy rash caused by the infestation of the scabies mite under the skin. While dogs are not a source for toxoplasmosis or Cat Scratch Disease, they can, in addition to other diseases discussed previously, transmit scabies.

There is a strong tendency for the condition to occur in skin folds, like under the arm, between the fingers and toes, in the fold of the groin, and around the waist line. The rash itself looks like tiny red bumps. There can be some scabs where the infected person has been scratching, and occasionally there may be some flaking. In addition to dogs, scabies is also transmitted by infected people.

Prevention: A thorough hand washing after petting animals is the best prevention.