

I have heard about cat scratch disease but don't know much about it. Is it something I should be worried about my children catching from our new cat?

Cat scratch disease (or fever) is a zoonotic disease first reported in a person in the 1950s but it took 40 more years to identify the organism that causes it. A zoonotic disease is an infectious disease that is spread from animals to humans. Cat scratch disease is the most common cat infection in this category. All ages of cats can be carriers, but most cases are transmitted by kittens. As many as 25,000 human cases are reported to the U. S. Centers for Disease Control each year, with the majority in children under 15 years old.

The cause of cat scratch disease (bartonellosis) is a bacterial infection with an organism known as *Bartonella henselae*. The infected cat may have mild symptoms of lethargy, fever and anorexia for a few days, or not show any symptoms but act as a reservoir of the bacteria. A flea or possibly a tick transmits the organism to the cat, but a bite or scratch from another infected cat could also be involved. The same methods of transmission are involved in human cases of disease.

If a person is scratched or bitten by an infected cat the first symptoms within a few weeks will be fever, and tender, enlarged lymph nodes of the neck and arms. A noticeable raised pustule may be seen in the area of the bite or scratch. In time the person may develop flu- like symptoms of anorexia, headache, sore muscles and joints. It may take several months, but most healthy adults clear the disease. In some cases, there could be more serious effects involving the eyes or brain if the immune system isn't functioning normally.

As many as 40% of healthy cats are carrying the organism and the ability to transmit it. Specialized tests are needed to determine if a cat has been exposed or is capable of spreading the disease. At least a month long course of antibiotics is needed to try to rid the cat of the infection in cats showing symptoms. There is currently no vaccine for prevention in for cats. Preventing the spread to the family can be avoided by teaching your children not to play roughly with the cat, or handle stray cats and kittens. Keeping your cats indoors will reduce their exposure. Effective treatment for fleas on the cats and any dogs in the house is also important. Trimming your cat's nails will also reduce scratches.

As far as risk to your children, bartonellosis offers minimal risk if you follow these suggestions.

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