

Cat-Scratch Disease

Cat-scratch disease is a common infection in children causing swollen lymph nodes, especially in the underarm and neck areas. It is caused by infection with bacteria called *Bartonella*, most often spread by a bite or scratch from a cat. Most children recover completely, even without treatment. Some complications are possible.

What is cat-scratch disease?

Cat-scratch disease is an infection of the lymph glands caused by the bacteria *Bartonella henselae*. It usually occurs after a bite or scratch by a cat, particularly a kitten. Infected cats spread the disease to humans.

Cat-scratch disease causes swollen glands and other relatively minor symptoms. However, the symptoms may take weeks or even months to clear up completely. Cat-scratch disease occurs in thousands of people each year. Because children love to play with cats, they are often affected.

What does it look like?

The main symptom of cat-scratch disease is swollen lymph glands:

- Swollen glands may be found in the underarm area, in the head and neck, or in the groin area. Sometimes more than one area is affected.
- The glands are tender and slightly red. The area of swelling is usually no bigger than a few inches but can become larger.
- Glands usually remain swollen for 1 to 2 months.

Other symptoms of cat-scratch disease include:

- One or more small red bumps (papules) appearing at the place where the cat bite or scratch occurred. Because these papules are small, they are easily overlooked. They may go unnoticed until the doctor suspects cat-scratch disease and starts to look for them.
- Fever sometimes occurs, along with other symptoms such as loss of appetite, tiredness, headache, and “feeling sick.”

Less commonly, cat-scratch disease may affect the eyes. Your child may have inflammation (redness and swelling) of one eye, along with swollen lymph glands. This form of cat-scratch disease probably results from rubbing the eyes after contact with an infected cat.

Rarely, cat-scratch disease causes more severe illness, including high fever, abdominal pain, and weight loss.

What causes cat-scratch disease?

Cat-scratch disease is caused by infection with *Bartonella henselae* bacteria. The bacteria usually spread to humans who are bitten or scratched by an infected cat.

Kittens may be more likely to spread the infection than older cats. The infected cat may not appear sick.

Papules usually develop at the site of the bite or scratch after about 1 or 2 weeks. Swelling of the glands located near the scratch develops 1 to 4 weeks later.

What puts your child at risk of cat-scratch disease?

Playing with cats, especially kittens. Although the infection is often spread by strays, it can also come from pet cats.

Can cat-scratch disease be prevented?

- Except for avoiding contact with cats, there is no way to prevent cat-scratch disease. Even a healthy-looking cat can be infected with the *Bartonella* bacteria.
- Cat-scratch disease does not spread from person to person.

What are some complications of cat-scratch disease?

Although they are uncommon, some complications of cat-scratch disease can occur. Most are not serious, although recovery may take some time.

- Up to 5% of patients may develop neurologic symptoms (encephalopathy), such as seizures, behavior changes, or confusion. Recovery may take several months to occur.
- Other complications are possible but rare, including:
 - Other nerve-related complications, such as temporary paralysis of facial muscles.
 - Eye complications, sometimes including temporary loss of vision.
 - Anemia and other blood abnormalities.

How is cat-scratch disease diagnosed and treated?

There are many possible causes of swollen lymph glands. Usually a simple blood test that checks for a specific antibody can determine whether your child is infected with *Bartonella* bacteria.

Cat-scratch disease generally clears up on its own, with or without treatment. It may take several weeks before your child's symptoms go away completely.

- Your child may receive antibiotics, such as azithromycin. However, medical studies have not proven that antibiotics will help your child recover any more quickly. In fact, cat-scratch disease is sometimes diagnosed only after antibiotics have failed to cure other suspected causes of swollen lymph glands.
- Rest and simple treatments will help to make your child more comfortable.
- If lymph glands become very swollen and painful a simple surgical procedure to drain away some of the pus inside the gland may be recommended.

- Your doctor will probably recommend follow-up visits to monitor your child's recovery from cat-scratch disease.

When should I call your office?

Call our office if:

- Your child's symptoms don't get better over time. However, be aware that it may take a few months for symptoms to clear up completely.
- Your child's lymph glands become very swollen and painful.
- Your child develops any changes in vision, behavior, or feeling (for example, tingling or numbness) or has difficulty moving the muscles of the face.