

Avoiding Cat Bites

Our topics for this week are:

- **Unique risks of cat bites**
- **Assessing the risk of being bitten by a cat**
- **How to avoid cat bites**

Incidence and Risk of Cat Bites

Cat bites are the reason approximately 66,000 people in the U.S. seek emergency care each year. Most bites occur in women. Cat bites are more common in veterinarians and veterinary technicians than dog bites.

Aggressively defensive cats do not pose a risk to human life; however, they can inflict serious injuries that may lead to impaired use of hands. The risk of infection from a cat bite is more than five times higher than from a dog bite.

Their first line of defense is their front claws. Besides causing painful injuries to arms and hands, cats will use their claws to strike at an opponent's eyes. Even superficial scratches can introduce bacteria, such as the bacteria for Cat Scratch Disease or a subcutaneous fungus called *Sporotrichum*. Lab or clinic coats with long sleeves should be worn when handling cats as a means of protecting against cat scratches. Back claws are a source of injury to handlers when holding a cat near the handler's body if the cat attempts to escape.

If frightened and use of the cat's claws is not believed by the cat to afford sufficient defense, it will bite. It will also bite during the excitement of predator play. Cats bite very quickly and let go quickly. They then will bite quickly again if the threat does not retreat. The bites are deep penetrating wounds that can injure and infect joint capsules, tendon sheaths, and bones, particularly of the hands. Permanent disabilities of the hand can result from cat bites.

Socialization with humans involves handling and playing with cats but play should not involve using hands as simulated prey. "Fishing" play with cats using a rod, string, and feathered object is much safer.

Aggressive Body Language of Cats

Domestic cats are very independent, especially if threatened. Their first reaction to a threat is to run and hide with no regard to where other cats are running or to other potentially dangerous things going on in the same area. In other words, cats run first and think later. Once hidden as well as they can which may just be cowering in the back of a cage, they often will issue warnings (low rumbling growls, hisses, and rapid strike and retreat) to threats that continue to approach.

Cats telegraph their aggression more consistently than do dogs. A dominance aggressive cat may do little cowering or hissing before striking, but they will have a fixed stare toward their opponent, dilated eyes, and their ears will be pulled back. They will stand confidently. Their tail will move back and forth to the sides with a flicking movement at the end of the tail. Their hair on the back will be raised. Their whiskers are elevated to a position where they stick straight out to the sides.

Fearful aggressive cats are more vocal and will flatten their ears and arch their back before striking usually from a crouching position. They do not stare directly at the opponent and may present their side to what they perceive as danger.

Avoiding Cat Bites

Most cat bites can be avoided by proper handling. When petting or playing with cats, do not encourage them to associate your hands with being a play prey or an aggressor. Redirect their attention to toy prey that it can hunt and capture. Introduce new toys or rotate toys on a frequent basis to prevent boredom. Use treats for good behavior, but do not feed treats from your hand. Place food treats in a bowl or toss them to the cat. Feed a routine meal at the end of a play period. Keep play period calm and relatively quiet. Don't play rough or rub their belly. Be consistent and require all other family members to follow the same rules.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Cat bites can cause permanent disability to the hands.**
- 2. Veterinary personnel are bitten by cats more often than by dogs.**
- 3. Most cat bites can be avoided by proper handling.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com. This website has more than 300 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.