

## FIGHT WOUND INFECTIONS

### **What is the cause of fight wounds on a cat?**

Over 90% of septic wounds in cats result from cat bites sustained during a cat fight. Dog, rat and other rodent bites can occur but they are much less common.



### **Why do cats fight?**

Cats are instinctively very territorial. They fight with other cats to protect their territory or to acquire more territory. As a result, fight wounds are common in cats. Fight wounds frequently result in infection that can make cats quite ill, especially if left untreated. Fight wounds are more common in male cats than females and are most frequent in un-neutered males.

### **My male cat has been neutered. Why does he still fight?**

Un-neutered male cats are very territorial; they will defend an area around their home but continually try to expand the borders of their territory. The desire for more territory and the need to keep intruders out of their existing territory means that they are constantly fighting with other cats. In contrast, neutered male cats defend a smaller area of territory around their home. If this territory is breached by another cat they will defend it by fighting. The frequency of fighting will depend on the number of cats in

the neighborhood and particularly the presence of un-neutered male cats. Female cats will also defend their territory by fighting with other cats.

### **What can I do to stop my cat from being bitten?**

Neutering is recommended but this may not completely eliminate fighting. Confining the cat to your house, particularly at night when cat fights are most common, will reduce the number of bites your cat sustains.

### **What happens after a cat has been bitten?**

When a cat bites, its teeth readily puncture the skin, leaving small wounds in the skin which rapidly seal over, trapping bacteria from the cat's mouth under the skin of the victim. The bacteria multiply under the skin. For several days there may be no sign of infection but then swelling and pain at the puncture sight are noticed. The cat may also have a fever. If the site of the bite is covered by loose skin, a pocket of pus will develop forming an abscess. In areas where the skin is not loose such as on the foot or the tail the infection spreads through the tissues and causes *cellulitis*.

Rarely there may be more serious consequences such as a *septic arthritis* (infection of a joint space), *osteomyelitis* (infection of bone) or *pyothorax* (the chest cavity becomes filled with pus).

### **What should I do if I know my cat has just been bitten?**

If you know that your cat has bite wounds, notify your veterinarian immediately. Antibiotics given within twenty-four hours will usually stop the spread of infection and may prevent the

development of an abscess. If several days have elapsed since the fight, an abscess will usually form, requiring more involved medical treatment.

### ***How will I know that my cat has a fight wound if I can't find any bite marks?***

Puncture wounds heal very quickly so there is often nothing to see or feel. The most common sites of bites are on the head, forelimbs or at the base of the tail. If cats have been bitten on a limb, the leg is usually painful and lameness is seen. It may be possible to feel heat and swelling in the area of the bite. Some cats may just be lethargic and have a fever. Many cats will excessively groom the injured area.



### ***What should I do if my cat gets an abscess or infected bite wound?***

You should take your cat to your veterinarian. If an abscess is present, your veterinarian will drain and flush the injured site. This may be done by removing the scabs over the original bite wounds or more commonly by lancing the skin over the abscess. It may be necessary to sedate or anesthetize your cat for this. If cellulitis occurs, drainage is not possible.

Antibiotics will be given either by injection or tablets. If your veterinarian prescribes antibiotic tablets for you to give to your cat, it is very important that you give **all** the tablets as directed.

### ***How should I manage the wound after my veterinarian has treated it?***

After your veterinarian has drained an abscess, a large wound may be left. This may be deliberately left open to allow for drainage. It is advisable to clean the wound twice a day for two to three days to keep it open. This is best done with cotton balls, gauze or washcloth and warm water. Use only disinfectants recommended by your veterinarian. Never use disinfectants containing phenols (e.g. TCP) because these are toxic to cats.

With large abscesses, your veterinarian may recommend a technique called debridement, in which all the infected tissue is removed, including any inflamed tissues that have walled off the abscess from the rest of the body. The resulting "clean" wound will be closed with sutures. In some situations, your veterinarian may also place a drainage tube in the wound, to allow any discharges to escape. You will be instructed to clean the drainage holes twice a day for two to five days, after which the drain will be removed. Once the tissues have completely healed, in about two weeks, the remaining sutures will be removed.

### ***How long will it take for the bite wound to heal?***

With appropriate treatment most abscesses should heal within five days. The swelling associated with cellulitis may take longer. If you feel the wound is not healing normally you should ask your veterinarian to examine it.

If you do not have your cat treated, there is a danger that the abscess will burst and only partially drain before healing begins. Similar consequences may follow if courses of antibiotics are not completed or adequate drainage is not maintained.

If an infected wound does not heal within a few days, your veterinarian may want to do further tests to see if there is an underlying cause. Certain viruses such as feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) and feline leukemia virus (FeLV) suppress the immune system and may complicate the cat's recovery from infection. Blood tests can be performed to diagnose these viral infections. A persistent draining wound may indicate that a foreign body such as a broken tooth, a claw or some soil is left in the wound and may require surgical exploration. Alternatively, it may indicate the presence of an unusual infectious agent requiring biopsies for culture and other tests.

***Why does my cat keep getting abscesses in the same place?***

This may reflect inadequate treatment as discussed in the question above where the abscess never completely resolves. Alternatively, it may reflect an individual cat's method of fighting; the cat that runs away will tend always to get bitten on the tail base whereas the aggressive attacking cat will tend always to be bitten on the head or forelimbs.

***Are there any other possible problems associated with fight wound infections?***

Bite wounds are considered to be the main route of transmission of some important feline infections, most notably, feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) and feline leukemia virus (FeLV). Blood tests should be performed after any bite wounds to diagnose these infections.

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*This client information sheet is based on material written by Ernest Ward, DVM  
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