



University of North Carolina Wilmington
Abrons Student Health Center

INSTRUCTION SHEET: DOG AND CAT BITES

The Student Health Provider has started treatment for a dog/cat bite.

Dog/cat bites are contaminated wounds, at higher risk for infection than most wounds. Most animals have millions of bacteria (germs) in their mouth. When an animal bites a human and breaks the skin, germs are introduced into the normally germ-free layers beneath the skin. The bacteria can multiply rapidly, leading to infection.

Infection is the main concern from a dog/cat bite. Deeper and larger wounds have more chance of infection, and need closer observation. Superficial scratch wounds have a lower rate of infection.

Rabies is another concern with a dog/cat bite. The chance of acquiring rabies from a dog or cat bite in the United States is very small, especially if the animal did not exhibit “rabid” behavior.

Nevertheless, since rabies is a potentially fatal disease, the Student Health Center routinely (following state law) reports the bite to County Animal Control Personnel. County personnel will talk with you, and make every effort to watch/confine the dog or cat for 10 days. If the animal exhibits rabid behavior, studies will be done on the animal to determine if rabies is present.

MEASURES YOU SHOULD TAKE TO HELP TREAT YOUR BITE WOUND:

1. Washing the wound with soap and water is the best initial treatment of a bite wound. Bacteria are flushed from the wound before germs can gain a foothold; chances of infection are lessened.
2. Rest the affected part. Elevate the area above the level of your heart.
3. If a preventive antibiotic is prescribed (only in some instances will one be prescribed), take it as directed, until gone.
4. Over-the-counter pain medications can help relieve the discomfort of a bite wound; acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen, or naproxen can be taken, depending on individual preference.
5. If you develop signs of infection, return to the Student Health Center or see another medical provider *promptly*. Signs of infection include: pus, increasing redness/warmth/swelling of the area, increasing pain, and red streaks spreading from the wound. Fever and chills appear later in the course of infection.