

CAT SCRATCH DISEASE

ZONOOSES FACTSHEET

Diseases that spread from animals to people

WHAT IS IT?



Cat scratch disease is sometimes called cat scratch fever. It is caused by a bacteria (germ) called *Bartonella spp.* that is spread in flea dirt. When the cat scratches at fleas on their skin, the flea dirt containing the bacteria ends up under their claws. If a cat scratches a person, then bacteria can get into the person's blood and make them sick. The cat is usually not sick.

WHAT IS FLEA DIRT?

Flea dirt is produced from the droppings of fleas. Flea dirt spreads in the cat's fur as the fleas move around.

WHAT DOES IT DO?

Cat scratch fever is spread by cats with fleas.



When a cat is covered in fleas carrying bacteria such as *Bartonella spp.* they frequently have the bacteria in flea dirt under their claws. If the cat scratches a person, the bacteria can spread to the person's blood and make them sick.

If the person is healthy the cat scratch disease can be mild. Usually a small red bump (papule) occurs at the site of the scratch, then 2-3 weeks later the infection can spread to the local lymph nodes causing pain and fever. These infections can resolve on their own or resolve easily with a course of antibiotics.

If the person is very young, very old or is otherwise sick the cat scratch disease can be more serious. It can cause a more widespread infection in the body and result in other diseases of the brain, heart and spleen. These infections are much more serious and can be life-threatening.

HOW DO YOU PREVENT IT?



Treat the cat for fleas. The most effective flea treatments are registered tablet/chews or spot-ons (such as Frontline, Nexgard, Bravecto). These stay in the animal's blood for 1 month or longer, killing fleas every time they take a blood meal. Other treatments, such as sprays, flea washes and flea collars, help to kill fleas but do not work as well. The vet may also recommend some treatments such as antibiotics or soothing creams or washes to help the skin.

Treat the environment for fleas. Fleas will keep coming back as long as fleas and flea eggs are still around. Make sure all animals in the household are treated. Wash all bedding, toys and other materials that may be housing fleas/flea eggs.



Practice good hygiene. Wash hands often. Keep sores clean to prevent infection. If you are scratched by a cat, wash under running water with soap for at least 5 minutes. Get the scratch checked at the health clinic.



For more information: please contact AMRRIC on (08) 8948 1768, email us at info@amrric.org or visit our website: www.amrric.org

REFERENCES

Brooke, W. (2019), *Bartonella and Cat Scratch Fever*, Veterinary Partner, Veterinary Information Network. <https://veterinarypartner.vin.com/default.aspx?pid=19239&id=4952003>.

Image 1: A flea viewed at 10x magnification, courtesy of Dr Amelia White <https://veterinarypartner.vin.com/default.aspx?pid=19239&id=7955321>;
Image 2: A cat in an Indigenous community, courtesy of AMRRIC; Image 3: Frontline Plus for cats <https://frontlinepetcare.com.au/products/frontline-plus-cats>; Image 4: Washed blanket drying on washing line, courtesy of AMRRIC. Other images are stock images.