

Abscesses: A Common Skin Condition in Cats

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Abscesses are a common skin condition in cats. They frequently occur as a result of bites during fights. A cat's mouth has many bacteria, and when a cat bites, the bacteria enter the puncture wound. Because cat teeth are sharp and relatively narrow, the wound often heals over, but the bacteria are trapped inside. The bacteria multiply and the cat's body reacts by trying to kill the bacteria. White blood cells, mostly neutrophils, enter the area. As the neutrophils die, more and more of them move to the area. The result is an abscess.

What is an abscess?

An abscess is a localized accumulation of pus. In the case of abscesses caused by cat bites, the pus also contains many bacteria.

Which cats are at risk for abscesses?

Unneutered male cats who are allowed outdoors are at highest risk of abscesses since they are the cats that are most likely to fight. Abscesses can also occur in indoor cats in multicat households. Cat fights and, therefore, abscesses are more likely when new cats are introduced into a household that already has cats.

What are the signs of an abscess?

Abscesses are often swollen, hot, and painful to the touch. If they open, a thick yellowish discharge may be seen, and it often has a foul smell. If an abscess does not open, the cat may become ill. In cats, an abscess is often hidden under the fur, and the first sign of illness the owner may see is that the cat is acting depressed and not eating. The cat usually has a fever.

Abscesses are usually found in those areas that are often bitten during a cat fight – limbs, head, neck, and the base of the tail. If the abscess is on a leg, the cat may limp. The cat may try to bite if the area is stroked or touched because the abscess is painful. Because of the pain, some cats may appear irritable or aggressive.

How is an abscess diagnosed?

If your cat is not eating, has a fever, and a history of contact with other cats, your veterinarian will be alerted to the possibility of an abscess. Upon examining your cat, the veterinarian may be able to see a small amount of matted fur over the abscess. The veterinarian will palpate the cat, searching for areas of inflammation. The fur will be clipped over the affected area, and often a small healing puncture wound can be found. It is often necessary to clip a wide area, to look for multiple puncture wounds, but caused by different teeth.

How are abscesses treated?

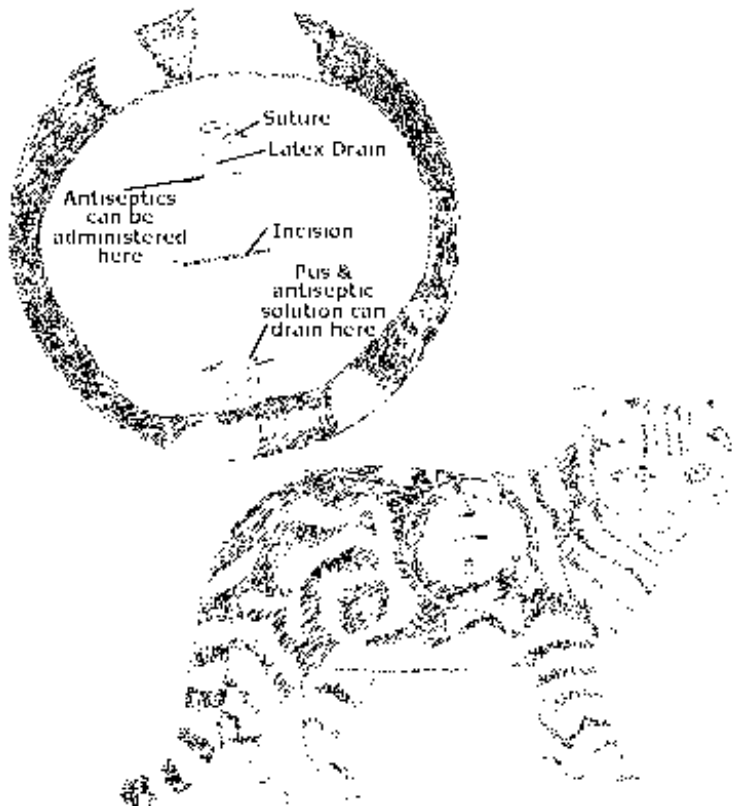
After the area is clipped and cleansed, the abscess will be lanced (an incision made by cutting), and drained. A relatively large opening is generally made, so the wound will continue to stay open and drain. The wound will be flushed numerous times with an antiseptic solution. Often antibiotics will be prescribed. In most cases, cats respond well after the abscess is opened.

If the abscess is very large, or deep, it may be necessary for the veterinarian to close the incision after the pus has drained, and then place a latex tube through the abscessed area. The latex tubing is placed through two small incisions above and below the main incision. The tubing keeps two openings in the skin to allow any newly formed pus to drain. The drain also provides a way to flush antiseptic solution through the area for several days, if necessary.

In addition to bacterial infections, other infections can be transmitted by cat fights. These include feline leukemia (FeLV), feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV), and rabies.

How can I prevent abscesses?

The main way to prevent abscesses is to



prevent your cat from being involved in cat fights. Keep your cat indoors. If your cat is an outdoor cat, have your cat spayed or neutered, since this will make your cat less likely to fight. When introducing new cats to each other, do it slowly.

To prevent transmission of other diseases, keep your cat's vaccination status current.