Cat Bite Infections, Wounds and Abscesses

When a cat bites, a deep puncture wound is usually the result. It is common for an abscess to develop at the site of the bite because the bacteria in the cat's mouth enter the puncture wound, causing infection. The opening of the wound seals over, trapping the infection inside. Pus accumulates and an abscess forms. Another condition, termed 'cellulitis,' can also occur in which the infection is spread over a wider area. The infection spreads throughout the tissues instead of accumulating at one location.

What are the signs of a cat bite abscess?
If the abscess does not open, the infection remains inside of the body causing fever, loss of appetite, and depression. The site of the abscess may appear swollen, red, and painful. If it is on a leg, the cat may limp. It may be very difficult to see the abscess without shaving the area, since the wound in the skin often heals over into just a tiny scab.

If the abscess breaks open and drains, foul smelling discharge is noted. The cat may lick at the area, causing hair loss. The skin may appear very red and fragile.

Abscesses most commonly occur on the neck, face, legs, and the base of the cat's tail since these are the areas where fighting cats tend to bite one another. They also tend to occur more commonly in male cats since they are more likely to fight.

How are cat bite abscesses, wounds and infections treated?
If you see or know your cat has been bitten by another cat, have the bitten cat examined by your veterinarian. Rapid treatment may prevent an abscess or serious infection from occurring.

If your cat has developed an abscess that has not opened on its own, your veterinarian will lance it to allow it to drain. This may or may not require sedation or anesthesia. The abscess will be flushed multiple times with an antiseptic solution. Depending upon the size and location of the abscess, a temporary latex or rubber drain may be sutured into the abscessed area to allow for continual drainage of the pus. If the abscess has opened on its own, it will be flushed with antiseptic and the health of the surrounding tissue evaluated. Sometimes severely damaged skin or underlying tissue may need to be surgically removed, and again a temporary drain may be necessary.

Usually, once the abscess has been opened and drained, the fever will subside and the cat will feel much better.

Antibiotics will be prescribed for the cat. It is important that the cat receive the entire course of antibiotics, even if the cat seems well before the antibiotics have all been used.

Pain medications may also be prescribed.

Depending on the location and severity of the infection, warm compresses may be advised for several days to help encourage the pus to drain.

What other concerns are there for a cat that has been bitten by another cat?
Several very severe and even fatal diseases can be transmitted to a cat through the bite of another cat. These include feline leukemia (FeLV), feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV), and rabies. Your veterinarian may recommend that your cat be tested for FeLV and FIV. Since a cat will not test positive for either of these viruses until several weeks after exposure to an infected cat, your veterinarian may recommend waiting several weeks before testing your cat.

Your veterinarian will need to know the rabies vaccination status of your cat, and may recommend revaccination.

What should I do if bitten by a cat?
If you are bitten by a cat, wash the bite wound thoroughly and contact your medical provider as soon as possible. Cat bites in people can cause severe infections in a short amount of time. The cat should be kept under observation until her rabies vaccination status can be determined. The cat may need to be quarantined (kept away from people and other animals) for 10 days, depending upon the circumstances.