

BARTONELLOSIS OR ‘CAT SCRATCH DISEASE’

(*Bartonella henselae*)

Introduction

An infection resulting from an inoculation into the body of a bacterium called *Bartonella henselae* (previously known as *Rochalimae henselae*) is seen in humans very infrequently. It goes by the correct term: *bartonellosis*.

The commonest causes of the inoculation are a cat scratch, a cat bite, a prick from a garden plant, and the bite from a skin parasite such as a tick.

However, while only 30% of cases of infection in humans are caused by a known animal-associated injury, 95% of cases occur in patients who own or have been in contact with animals, specifically dogs and cats.

What is Bartonellosis?

Bartonellosis is an infection, in reality a contagion, caused by the gram-negative bacterium *Bartonella henselae*. It does not grow readily in the laboratory, is not easily recovered from wounds and may for those reasons be seen uncommonly as a zoonosis – an infection picked up from animals.

Infectivity, Source of Infection and Diagnosis in Cats

Bartonellosis is not a disease of cats but of humans. Cats may acquire the bacteria from the bites of ticks and fleas, or from contact with mice and rats. The exact source hasn't been proven clearly yet so a very few cats may be what are called 'silent carriers'. The organism has been found around the nails of some cats, particularly those living an outdoor life or are feral. Otherwise there will be little to see in a carrier cat.

Bartonellosis and Humans

Humans can contract the bacterium *Bartonella henselae* accidentally from a cat scratch or bite, or a scratch while gardening or, as more recently discovered, a tick bite. The chance of infection is reduced if immediate, thorough cleansing and disinfection of the wound is undertaken. The disease

is usually a benign and self-limiting swelling of the lymph glands nearest to the site of injury. Children not uncommonly are the ones to show this form of the condition. If the more serious infection does occur, it develops about six to eight weeks after the event and may consist of a non-painful, brownish-red circular raised area, called a papule, around the site of the scratch or bite. This lesion may last for days or even a couple of weeks. At the end of that time, there may be signs of redness or 'tracking' of the infection up the limb. Lymph nodes near the area of the original scratch or bite may enlarge. These lymph nodes often are painful to the touch and the swellings last for several weeks after which they slowly decrease to their normal size. Some people have associated symptoms such as fever, feeling run down, headaches and neck or abdominal pain.

Treatment and Prevention in Humans

From what is commonly experienced, antibiotics do not have to be given to change the typical course of *bartonellosis*. For that 10% of patients whose lymph nodes do not subside within a few months, antibiotics may be given. The only instance in which antibiotics are clearly known to help is when the infection occurs to someone with a poor immune system, for example people who are HIV-positive, who are being or have been treated with chemotherapy or are old and frail.

Conclusion

The disease, which is very uncommon in the UK, takes the form of a localised infection at the wound site and swollen lymph glands. Infection is unlikely to occur if immediate thorough cleansing and disinfection of any wound is undertaken.

Pet owners should keep the issue in perspective; continue to follow the usual and well-established hygiene routines with their pet and remember the benefits, including to people's health, that pets provide.

Pets are Good for People

Pets provide us with loyalty, companionship, love and affection, as well as the many physical and psychological benefits. The least we can do to repay this is to ensure that we keep them in the best of health. A healthy pet is a happy pet and a happy pet can help us enjoy a much fuller and more rewarding life.

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For further information, please contact the Pet Health Council on:

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