

# Cat scratch can sometimes lead to serious illness: CDC

September 21 2016, by Steven Reinberg, Healthday Reporter

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(HealthDay)—If Fluffy the cat gets out of sorts and scratches you, it's

possible you could get a bacterial infection called cat-scratch disease that might even land you in the hospital.

An estimated 12,000 Americans are infected each year with cat-scratch disease, and around 500 must go to the hospital, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said.

The disease is spread by infected fleas. Cats pick up the bacteria that causes the disease—*Bartonella henselae*—from scratching and grooming flea excrement on their fur. They can then transfer the bacteria by scratching someone.

"When cats scratch themselves they get the bacteria on their claws, so when they scratch a person the bacteria can enter the skin and infect the person," said lead researcher Dr. Christina Nelson, a CDC medical officer.

People also get the illness from cat bites or through a break in the skin, she said.

To estimate the extent of the disease and who is most at risk, the researchers examined insurance claims databases.

The researchers found that cat-scratch disease is most common among children ages 5 to 9 and in people who live in the southern United States.

Those who get the disease may have a bump where the bacteria entered the skin, and they may have a fever or feel fatigued, Nelson said.

"The main symptom is a swollen lymph node near to where the bacteria entered the skin—that's the hallmark of cat-scratch disease," she said.

Treatment is a course of antibiotics to kill the bacteria, Nelson said.

Some people can have severe complications, Nelson said. The bacteria can affect the brain and bones, cause eye infections, and in rare cases, be fatal, she said.

The researchers found those most likely to be admitted to the hospital were male and between 50 and 64 years old.

If you're worried about infection, does that mean Fluffy has to go? No, but you might want to take measures to lessen the risk of infection, the researchers said.

"Cat-scratch disease is preventable and people can reduce their risk," Nelson said.

Simple steps to prevent infection include keeping your cat indoors, or only letting it out for short periods. Using flea control products to keep Fluffy flea-free can also greatly reduce the odds of getting the disease, she said.

Also, washing your hands after touching your cat is a good idea, Nelson said. She also suggested talking with your vet to figure out the best way to keep your cat flea-free.

The report is scheduled to be published in the October issue of the CDC journal *Emerging Infectious Diseases*.

Dr. Marc Siegel, a professor of medicine at NYU Langone Medical Center in New York City, called cat-scratch disease "an under-recognized problem, so people should watch it when playing with cats."

It's usually a mild disease and mostly a problem for kids, he said. The bacteria is most common in cats that spend time outdoors, he added.

"Cats that are on the prowl or hunting in the woods get more fleas, so they are more likely to carry the [bacteria](#)," Siegel said.

"Don't let your cat prowl," Siegel said. "If your cat has been roaming, wash your hands and your kids' hands after touching the animal."

**More information:** To learn more about cat-scratch disease, visit the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

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