

Diseases from Cats

Zoonotic diseases are those that are shared by or transmissible between animals and people. Although cats can carry diseases and pass them to people, you are not likely to get sick from touching cat. By following simple health tips, you can be safe against cat-related diseases.

Immunosuppressed people or infants are more likely than others to get diseases from cats. Most people are unlikely to acquire infectious diseases from healthy, adult, parasite free, indoor cats. In many instances of cat-associated diseases, it is more likely one person will become infected from contact with another person or contaminated environment than from an infected cat. The following is a brief description of the most common cat-associated illnesses that are encountered in the Long Island area. Many of the recommendations listed below were adapted from those utilized by the Centers for Disease Control and the American Association of Feline Practitioners.

To protect yourself from cat-related diseases

- Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and running water after touching cat feces (stool)
- Avoid cat scratches and bites
- If you are scratched or bitten by a cat, wash the area with soap and running water right away
- Vaccinate your cat against rabies

[Learn more about selected cat-related diseases below](#)

Hookworms, Tapeworms, Roundworms

Hookworms and roundworms are typically acquired by accidentally swallowing dirt that has been contaminated with cat feces that contain infectious hookworm or roundworm eggs. Hookworm infections can cause intestinal bleeding, inflammation and abdominal pain.

Hookworms also have the potential to migrate through the skin causing itchy and painful skin infections. Roundworms typically do not cause disease in people. On rare occasions, though, roundworms can migrate through the eyes and body, causing eye damage, fever, coughing or abdominal pain. Tapeworms are typically acquired from eating raw or undercooked beef or pork, not from animals. Tapeworms can cause no symptoms or mild symptoms such as abdominal pain or weight loss.

Toxoplasmosis

Toxoplasma gondii is a parasite that often only causes mild flu-like symptoms in people, but can cause miscarriage and birth defects in pregnant women and severe illness in immunosuppressed individuals. Toxoplasmosis is a disease that can come from cats, but people are more likely to get it from eating raw meat or from gardening. For more information, please see our other information handout "Toxoplasmosis and You".

Cat Scratch Disease (*Bartonella henselae*):

Cat scratch disease is a bacterial disease caused by *Bartonella henselae*. Most people acquire it through a bite or scratch from a cat. Kittens are more likely to be infected and to pass the bacterium to people. While fleas are known to sometimes be infected with *B. henselae*, there is no evidence to show that people can acquire infection from fleas. Symptoms usually include swollen lymph nodes, fever, fatigue and headaches, though persons with immunocompromised conditions can have more significant complications. Cats that carry *B. henselae* do not show any signs of illness; therefore, you cannot tell which cats can spread the disease to you. You can reduce the risk of getting cat scratch disease from your cat by avoiding "rough play" with cats, especially kittens. Also, thoroughly wash cat bites and scratches immediately and do not allow your cat to lick any open wounds that you may have. Cats should be on routine flea preventive medication.

Rabies

Rabies is a disease caused by the rabies virus and it affects the central nervous system. Early symptoms in people include confusion, sleepiness and headaches; but it often leads to seizures, coma, and finally death. Once a person starts having symptoms, that person usually does not survive. People usually get the disease after being bitten by an infected animal, which includes bats, raccoons, skunks, foxes, cats and dogs. You can protect yourself by keeping your pets updated on their rabies vaccine and keeping them from coming in contact with wild animals (including stray and feral cats). If your cat is bitten by a wild animal, seek immediate veterinary assistance. Avoid contact with any unfamiliar animal; do not feed, adopt, attract, or handle unfamiliar animals. Teach children to do the same. Prevent bats from entering living quarters where they might come into contact with people or pets.

Ringworm:

Ringworm is a skin and scalp disease caused by different kinds of fungi. Ringworm on the scalp usually makes a scaly bald patch, while on the skin, it usually looks like a ring-shaped rash that is red, dry, scaly, and may itch. Ringworm is acquired by direct contact with an infected animal's skin or fur. People can also get the disease from other infected people. In cats, ringworm typically causes loss of fur and the skin may become scaly or grey in appearance. Contact your veterinarian if you note any missing patches of fur on your cat.

Salmonella Infection (salmonellosis):

Salmonella is a bacterial disease that often causes self-limiting diarrhea, stomach pain, and fever in people. It is often acquired from undercooked food, but can be transmitted through feces of infected cats. It can also be transmitted through contact with certain "high risk" animals, namely amphibians, reptiles and poultry. You can protect yourself by thoroughly washing your hands after touching fecal material or contact with high risk animals.