Animal Bites During Pregnancy: What Should You Do?

Pregnancy comes with plenty of surprises but getting bitten by a nonvenomous animal like a dog, cat, or squirrel is not on the top of the list.

The good news is that most animal bites can be managed safely during pregnancy. Knowing what to be concerned about can help protect both you and your developing baby.

When Are Animal Bites a Concern in Pregnancy?

Most concerns after an animal bite are related to the possibility of an infection.

Animals have bacteria in their mouths, and even a small bite can sometimes lead to an infection. Signs to watch for include:

- Increasing redness around the bite
- Swelling
- Warmth around the wound
- Pus or drainage
- Fever
- Worsening pain

If you notice any of these symptoms, contact your healthcare provider right away.

Some bites, especially cat bites, have a higher chance of becoming infected because cats' teeth can push bacteria deep under the skin.

If your healthcare provider believes there is a significant infection risk, they may recommend antibiotics. MotherToBaby has a podcast on antibiotics if you would like to know more: Antibiotics – MotherToBaby

What About Rabies?

Rabies is a viral infection that affects the nervous system (the brain, spinal cord, and nerves). In the United States, rabies is uncommon in people, however, it can be transmitted through bites from animals who have rabies. A healthcare provider may consider rabies prevention treatment if you are bitten by a:

- bat
- raccoon
- skunk
- fox
- stray animal
- or any animal acting unusually interested in biting humans or appearing sick

One question MotherToBaby specialists sometimes hear is: “Can I still get rabies shots while pregnant?”

Rabies shots have been studied for use in pregnancy and have not been known to increase risks for birth defects or cause other negative pregnancy problems. The deadly outcomes of untreated rabies can be avoided with appropriate treatment. Your healthcare team can help determine whether treatment is needed based on the type of animal and circumstances of the bite. If you are ever concerned about rabies exposure, always reach out to your healthcare provider right away.

Do Not Forget About Tetanus

Animal bites could also introduce bacteria that cause tetanus through an open wound. Tetanus is a serious illness that causes severe muscle tightness and spasms with no cure. In the United States, obtaining the Tdap or DTaP vaccines on schedule can help prevent tetanus.

If it has been a while since your last tetanus-containing vaccine, your healthcare provider may recommend a booster. Many pregnant women already receive a Tdap vaccine during pregnancy to help protect their newborn from pertussis (whooping cough), but timing and wound management recommendations can vary. Your healthcare provider can help determine what is appropriate for your situation.

What About My Pregnancy?

The primary concerns with animal bites in pregnancy are those that break the skin and could lead to an infection, or those causing harm to the abdomen. If a bite is not on the abdomen, and does not break the skin, the risks to a pregnancy are low.

Prompt wound care and medical evaluation can go a long way toward reducing risks. However, if you experience severe injury, significant blood loss, fever, or other concerning symptoms after a bite, seek medical attention immediately.

How Can I Prevent Animal Bites?

A few simple precautions can help:

- Avoid approaching unfamiliar animals.
- Never try to handle wild animals.
- Teach children to respect animals' space.
- Keep pets up to date on veterinary care and vaccinations.
- Be cautious around animals that are eating, sleeping, or caring for their young.

The Bottom Line

Most animal bites during pregnancy are more scary than dangerous. Cleaning the wound, contacting a healthcare provider, and getting prompt medical advice can help prevent complications.

If you have questions about animals, or other exposures during pregnancy or breastfeeding, MotherToBaby specialists are available to provide evidence-based information you can trust.

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