

Cat Scratch Fever FAQs

You've probably heard the name before. Unfortunately, "cat scratch fever" isn't just an old Ted Nugent song. It's also a disease that people can catch from cats. The bacteria, *Bartonella henselae*, is transmitted through the scratch (or possibly bite) of an infected cat. Since cat scratch fever is transmitted from animals to people, it is categorized as a zoonotic disease.



Is Cat Scratch Fever Serious?

For the average person, cat scratch fever is not a major health concern. An infection typically causes minor swelling near the scratch or bite. Several weeks later, there may be swelling of nearby lymph nodes and a fever. This mild syndrome usually resolves without any further problems. Someone with a compromised immune system, however, can develop severe systemic infections from *Bartonella* infection.

Is My Cat at Risk?

Most cats do not get very sick from *Bartonella* infection. Unless they have underlying health issues, they may not appear ill or unusual.

Is My Family at Risk?

Cats are only able to spread cat scratch fever to humans if the bacteria is present on their claws or teeth. Fleas are to blame for putting it there. Cats with fleas will likely scratch at their bites, and pick up flea feces containing *Bartonella* on their claws. If there are no fleas, then there will be no spread of the infection.

Should My Cat Be Tested?

Routine screenings for the bacteria aren't recommended, in part because there's no reliable way to test cats for *Bartonella*. Some of the tests available check for antibodies to the bacteria. This only proves that a cat has been exposed at some point. (In regions like New England, where warm and humid weather promote flea reproduction, as many as 40 percent of cats may test positive.) Other tests look for the presence of bacteria in the cat's body. These often miss the disease, as the bacteria circulates intermittently.

How Can Cat Scratch Fever Be Prevented?

Prevention of cat scratch fever is mostly a question of flea control. There are several safe and effective products that can be used year-round. Never use over-the-counter flea products without consulting your veterinarian. Many of the old-fashioned, retail brands contain poisons that are very toxic to cats.