

# What Can I Catch from my Cat?

## *Feline Zoonoses*



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Zoonotic diseases (zoonoses) are illnesses that sometimes develop after being exposed to infectious organisms that are passed between animals and people. Some bacteria, viruses, parasites, prions (misfolded proteins), and fungi can be zoonotic and make people sick. There are many precautions that you can take to minimize the risk of exposure to zoonotic organisms. It is important to note that a cat can be carrying one of these organisms but not show any visible signs of sickness. In some situations, people can be a source of infection for a cat (reverse zoonoses).

### HOW ARE ZONOTIC ORGANISMS SPREAD?

Zoonotic organisms can be acquired from direct contact with infected cats, contact with contaminated food or water, from vectors (i.e. fleas, mosquitoes or ticks), or from the shared environment. The organisms can be spread through a variety of means including:

- Saliva
- Bites or scratches
- Respiratory secretions (i.e. cough, nasal discharge, mucus)
- Skin or hair
- Feces
- Urine
- Vectors (i.e. fleas, mosquitoes or ticks)



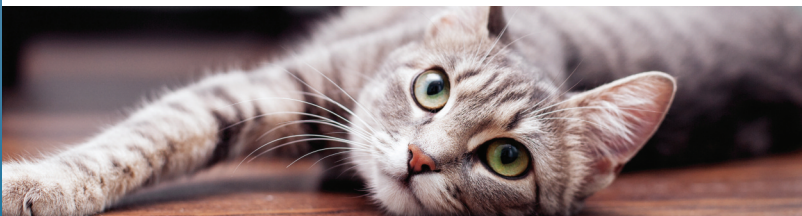
### WHO IS AT RISK?

Zoonotic diseases are often more severe in people who have a weak or compromised immune system such as those being treated for cancer or those undergoing an organ transplantation. However, some zoonotic organisms, like the rabies virus, can cause illness in humans regardless of a person's immune status. Therefore, precautions and preventive measures should always be taken to avoid direct or indirect exposure.

### EXAMPLES OF POTENTIAL CAT-ASSOCIATED ZONOSSES

There are many zoonotic organisms that can be shared between cats and people. The following are several examples:

**Cat scratch fever** *Bartonella* spp. are the bacteria that cause fever and enlarged lymph nodes that frequently develop near a cat bite or scratch. The organisms are passed in flea feces which can then contaminate the cat's hair, claws, or mouth. This agent can also cause other inflammatory diseases similar to those caused by Lyme disease. This zoonosis is avoided by using strict flea control, and avoiding bites and scratches from cats.



**Gastrointestinal (GI) agents** A number of parasites (i.e. some tapeworms, roundworms, hookworms, or some strains of *Giardia*) and bacteria (i.e. *Salmonella*) are passed in feces. The zoonotic risk is greatest if the cat has diarrhea. These agents can be largely avoided by:

- routinely deworming your cat
- washing your hands frequently after handling cats
- cleaning the litterbox every day
- avoiding handling soil or produce that could be contaminated with cat feces
- not allowing your cat to hunt live prey
- feeding your cat high-quality commercial food

**Ringworm** This fungus can infect cat hair shafts, which can then contaminate the environment or infect a human. Infected cats may or may not have problems with their hair or skin. If a family member develops skin lesions your cat(s) should be evaluated by your veterinarian for this infection.

**Rabies** This deadly virus is shed in the saliva of infected animals, including cats. Rabies is commonly transmitted by bites and is 100% preventable through vaccination. New feline rabies vaccines have minimal side effects and can protect your cat and family.

**Toxoplasmosis** Only cats can pass the *Toxoplasma gondii* parasite in feces. The parasite becomes infectious after about 24 hours in the environment, which is why it is recommended to clean the litterbox every day to reduce risk. Most cats only shed the organism for about 10 days and usually do not leave feces on their body, and so the risk of acquiring this infection from touching your cat is extremely low. Most human exposures occur from ingesting the parasite in the environment, where it can live for up to 18 months. This is why you should wash your hands after gardening, thoroughly wash your produce, and avoid drinking unfiltered water from the environment. Toxoplasmosis can also be acquired by eating undercooked meat. Most people exposed to the parasite never develop signs of toxoplasmosis. The greatest risk is to the fetus of pregnant women and those with severe immune deficiency.

### DECREASE YOUR RISK

Sick cats are more likely than healthy cats to pass zoonotic agents. So, the most important thing you can do to avoid zoonotic disease agents is to bring your sick cat to the veterinarian for diagnostic tests and treatments.

Annual physical checkups and wellness visits are imperative so that you and your veterinarian can develop an individualized plan to optimize the health of your cat and lessen the risk of you and your family acquiring a zoonosis.

Here is a summary of the most important things you can do to lessen the risk of contracting a zoonotic disease:

- Administer the optimal internal parasite products recommended by your veterinarian to all cats, including those living indoors. Flies, cockroaches, and mosquitoes can still gain access to even the most well-secured house.

- Administer the optimal flea and tick control products recommended by your veterinarian to lessen the risk for disease like cat scratch fever or Lyme disease. These agents can unknowingly be brought into the home by you or another pet.
- Litter boxes should be scooped at a minimum of once per day. Wash your hands after each contact with the litter box and wash the litter box every 1-4 weeks using soap and hot water.
- Sometimes animals defecate in dirt or plant beds. Wear gloves when gardening and wash hands thoroughly when finished.
- Cats should not consume raw foods, raw diets, or undercooked foods. Do not share food utensils with cats.
- Claws should be trimmed frequently to lessen the risk of deep scratches; claw covers can be considered.
- If bitten or scratched by a cat, seek medical attention.
- Good hygiene should always be maintained with pets. Wash your hands with soap and water after petting cats, cleaning food or water bowls, and after scooping litter.
- Stray cats are best handled only by appropriately trained professionals.
- If adopting a new cat, it should be quarantined from other cats and any immunocompromised person until a thorough physical examination and zoonosis risk assessment is performed by a veterinarian.
- Discuss any human-related healthcare concerns with your veterinarian who can help liaise with your healthcare provider, especially if you are aware of any potential immunocompromised individuals in your household.

Through preventive care, it is possible to decrease the risk of exposure to many of these zoonoses.



For more information on feline zoonoses, visit  
[www.catfriendly.com/zoonoses](http://www.catfriendly.com/zoonoses).

For more information on cat scratching, visit [catfriendly.com/scratching](http://catfriendly.com/scratching).

**You are an important member of your cat's healthcare team.  
 You are instrumental in helping with the success of  
 treatments and improved healthcare for your cat.**

