

# When Your Hand Is Bitten by the Mouth

By Paul Kinzey

One Saturday morning, my cat (barely out of kittenhood) went into heat. My daughter's male cat (not neutered) decided he was top cat and started fighting my other male cat (neutered). I broke up one fight, but they started again. I grabbed the aggressor by his back, and he bit the fleshy part of my left hand at the base of the thumb.

I cleaned the wound by letting it bleed under running water. It hurt, but I'd had bee stings that were worse. I bandaged it, using Scotch tape and gauze, and went out to breakfast. I considered going to an urgent-care center but didn't want to spend my time off and \$10 on what I considered a minor problem.

The next day, I woke up with a severely swollen hand. I couldn't move my fingers or wrist. The funny thing is that it still wasn't real painful. I put some heat on it and started thinking about driving my truck (which doesn't have power steering or an automatic transmission) on a 360-mile trip that I had to make the next day. I again thought about going to an urgent-care center and decided it was stupid not to do so. After all, they would just clean out the wound, give me some antibiotics and pain pills, and tell me to keep some heat on my hand. I could still go on my trip.

However, as soon as the doctor on duty saw my hand, she said, "I'm sending you to the emergency room of the hospital next door. They're probably going to have to operate on your hand."

"What?"

"Furthermore," she continued, "animal bites—particularly cat bites—can be serious. You could lose your hand. By the way, when was your last tetanus shot?"

After rolling up my sleeve and getting the shot, I paid my \$10 co-payment and headed next door to the

emergency room. There, my worst fears came true. After I signed in and told the nurses that I had an animal bite, they called Animal Control to report it. More about that later.

By now I was running a low-grade fever. An orthopedic specialist came in to look at my hand. "We're going to have to operate to clean out the wound," he said. "But first, I have to take a sample of the wound to identify the infectious agent. We'll just insert a needle to take a culture. It won't hurt too much."

I was skeptical, especially when two nurses grabbed my arm to hold it. It felt like the cat bite all over again, only slower this time. Midway into the procedure, my girlfriend (who was standing by) remarked that this must really hurt. The doctor replied that it hurt like hell. We were finally in agreement.

I asked the doc if I could go home after the operation. He told me I would have to spend the night in the hospital and would probably have to stay as long as a week. I was dumbfounded. During all this, in rolls the Animal Control officer. He wanted to know who owned the cat and if I knew if it had a rabies vaccination. I 'fessed up that it was my cat, and it had never been vaccinated. Then he wanted to know if someone was home to care for the animal. I told him there was.

After he left, I was wheeled to surgery. When I finally got back to my room, my hand was bandaged, and I had a plastic cast from my elbow to the tips of my fingers, held in place by an Ace bandage. An IV was hanging by my bed. A nurse came in and told me I could have Demerol every two hours, if I needed it. Since the nurses couldn't take blood via the IV, they had to put in another one to get blood samples.

# ten It Feeds

The next day, an orthopedist and an infectious-disease specialist visited me. They decided to keep me in the hospital another two or three days, and before I could go home, they had to install a PICC (peripheral inserted central catheter) line so I could get a steady stream of antibiotics at home.

The next morning, I was in another operating room to get this PICC line installed. I got a shot of Lidocaine in my right arm. After the shot, the only thing I felt was blood trickling down my arm. Then I felt the surgeon inserting the catheter. He clicked on a fluoroscope and checked its position, making a few pushes and pulls until he had properly inserted it into my main chest vein. Then he stitched the catheter into place and covered it with a large plastic bandage that had to be changed every three days. Out came the old IV in my lower arm and in went the new IV connection into the PICC line. Finally, I was back in my room.

The next day, the orthopedist showed up. He took off the bandage and cast and said my wound looked good. "Try to move your hand," he says. I said it hurt. Then he grabbed my fingers and bent them backward. "You need to move your fingers," he admonishes. After coming off the ceiling, I agreed to keep them moving. I couldn't wait for that next shot of Demerol.

When the orthopedist left, the infectious-disease specialist strolled in. "Your insurance covers home care," he announces. "so, we can send you home and hook up your IV to a pump."

If an animal bites you, see a doctor immediately.



Wednesday morning, I was finally released from the hospital. I packed my gear, got dressed, walked out to my truck, and drove myself home.

At home, I found that people from Animal Control had put tape on all the doors and locks to make sure someone had been in the house caring for the animals. The tape was missing from the door my girlfriend used to go in and out. I also found a notice for me to give Animal Control a call. Later that day, a hospital-supply van dropped off two IVs, a pump and assorted supplies. The IVs had to be refrigerated, so I figured the saline solution had to have the same treatment.

Soon a nurse arrived. The first thing she did was flush the IV with the refrigerated saline. After that, I vowed there would be no more refrigerated saline. The pump is ingenious. Powered by two nine-volt batteries, it scans a preprinted bar-chart, which defines the dosage. It's scheduled to use the entire IV in 24 hours, with a major dose every four hours. A residual dose is constantly fed to keep the line clear. If the line gets blocked, it beeps. If the batteries go dead, it beeps. When it starts to cycle, it beeps. With all this, a full night's sleep is out of the question.



I finally called people at Animal Control. They told me I needed to quarantine the cat for 14 days. The officer said he wasn't going to give me a ticket because I had suffered enough. No kidding!

Eventually, I learned to avoid snagging the IV line. I adjusted the schedule for supply deliveries and the visiting nurse, and I went back to work. Two weeks later, I was still getting the IV. The infectious-disease specialist wanted it on for another week. Finally, after nearly three weeks, the IV came out. But I still am on antibiotics. The stitches came out, and the cast was removed. But my thumb still feels numb. The doc said there was some nerve damage that should clear up in about six months.

Fortunately, my insurance covered the \$10,000 bill, but I lost nearly two weeks of sick leave because of this incident, and I may have permanent damage to my thumb.

What are the lessons I learned from this ordeal? First, don't get involved in a fight between two cute, fuzzy critters. Dump water on them, or let them fight it out. Second, if an animal bites you, see a doctor immediately. I don't know if the outcome would be different, but early intervention may have saved me a stint in the hospital. Get your animals vaccinated. If it had been a stray cat or I couldn't have quarantined the animal, I would have gotten the rabies series. Neuter your animals. I still have my cats, but all of the females have been spayed and the unneutered male that bit me is getting his now.

By the way, I've been told that there are two bites worse than a cat bite. One is a monkey bite. But the worst is a human bite. So the next time you want to bust somebody in the mouth, don't. It may hurt you and your wallet a lot more than it hurts your foe. 🚫

Mr. Kinzey is a chief engineer in the Aeromedical Division at the Naval Safety Center.

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