# Points on Pets: Burning questions about cat-scratch fever

*by R.G._Elmor_DVM*

Q: Someone recently told me that fleas are involved in the fevers caused by cat scratches in humans. Although this seems strange to me I am quite interested in knowing about this relationship, since I am recovering from a severe scratch caused by my neighbor's cat. The cat that scratched me lives outside, so he does not like people and is very difficult to catch. I was scratched while trying to help my neighbor get the cat into a box to take him to a veterinarian for routine vaccinations and a health check.

A: The very interesting relationship between fevers caused in humans by cat scratches and fleas was reported several years ago. A third part of this relationship is a bacteria called Bartonella henselae, one of the most common causes of cat-scratch fever in humans. People become infected with bartonella when infected flea feces on the claws of infected cats break the skin while scratching them. Within three to 10 days following the scratch, a red sore is usually noticed at the site of injury. This is often followed within a few weeks by swelling of the lymph nodes draining the area where the scratch occurred.

Although cat scratches can cause fever, loss of appetite, and general weakness in people, most healthy individuals do not notice any lasting discomfort and scratches are forgotten about within a few days. Of course illnesses due to cat scratches are usually most severe in people with suppressed immune systems.

The bartonella bacteria can be carried by cats without symptoms. In other words, many cats have bartonellea within their bodies without being visibly sick. Some authorities have stated that as many as 80 percent of all cats are asympotomatic carriers of bartonella. Fleas transmit bartonella between cats.

Fortunately, the incidence of cat-scratch fever in people can be greatly minimized by simply preventing fleas in cats. Everyone handling feral or wild cats must be extremely careful to not be scratched or bitten. These cats are more likely to have external parasites, including fleas. Your veterinarian can outline a complete wellness program for your cats. This will include the elimination of fleas.

Q: This might seem like a dumb question! How can you tell the sex of a bird? I never really thought about this until our children decided that we need to have a bird as a pet. Now we have a lot of questions.

A: Your question is not dumb at all. In many cases it is impossible to tell the sex of a bird by just looking at its external characteristics. Therefore, most veterinarians determine the genders of birds by actually looking at their reproductive organs with a special instrument inserted through very small incisions made in the birds' abdominal walls. Because the incisions are so small, usually no sutures are required to close them following the procedures. Most birds are back on their feet within a few minutes following completion of the examinations.

Surgical sexing of birds is usually done very quickly, is accurate, and is safe when done by experienced veterinarians. If your veterinarian is not comfortable doing this procedure, you should request a referral to a veterinarian specializing in avian practice.

Send an e-mail or write to Pets, P.O. Box 120190, San Diego, CA 92112-0190. Only questions of general interest will be answered in this column.

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