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The Dangers of Dog and Cat Bites

By Beth Guerra, DVM

Summer is upon us, and it is time for dogs to be social. When the weather is good, dogs are out for walks, swimming in lakes, and running around at off-leash dog parks. This presents a unique situation where dogs of all shapes and sizes are introduced to each other, and it is often difficult to predict how one dog may respond to others.

Our emergency service frequently sees victims of dog bites. This could be a minor bite wound sustained from a brief tussle or major trauma from an aggressive attack. These do not just occur between strange dogs; often dogs in the same house that have been co-existing peacefully can find themselves in a fight, often over food or territory. The concern with this type of trauma, especially from larger dogs with extremely powerful bites, is that extensive injury can occur under the skin where only small punctures or even only mild bruising are visible.

In situations where two fairly equally matched dogs inflict bite wounds, the injuries are usually multiple punctures or small lacerations. Tearing of the skin can also cause it to separate from the underlying, or subcutaneous, tissues, leaving pockets for fluid or infection to accumulate. These types of wounds require extensive flushing to remove bacteria and often debris such as fur or dirt. Occasionally, a sterile tubing, or drain, is placed in these pockets to allow fluid to evacuate over a few days. Sometimes, crushing injury occurs to the blood supply in the skin, causing the skin to become leathery and occasionally slough. Damage to underlying fat, muscles or nerves can also occur. In severe situations, exploration of the wounds is recommended to allow the veterinarian to visualize and debride (remove) any compromised tissue before it becomes infected or necrotic. Pain control and anti-inflammatory medications are essential as these types of injuries are extremely painful. Antibiotics are prescribed as well.

Picture

Dog & cat bites can cause serious infection. It is best to have your pet seen by a veterinarian as soon as possible.

When a smaller dog or cat is attacked by a larger dog, the above injuries can occur, however, there can also be severe internal injuries. Often these animals will present with only small puncture wounds that do not appear too severe on initial presentation. Once these wounds are clipped, extensive bruising is revealed. This can indicate deeper trauma, such as tears in the chest or abdominal wall, punctures or crushing to the lungs, intestines, liver, or kidneys. When this type of presentation occurs, exploratory surgery of the abdomen or chest is recommended as this type of damage is not easily diagnosed with x-rays or ultrasound. Waiting for problems to develop before surgical exploration can lead to a more risky surgery if the patient is compromised.

Fractures or dislocations can be a sequelae of these types of attacks. While addressing these injuries seems imminent, failure to assess shock and look for other types of trauma can be fatal. Fractures or open wounds are usually assessed but extensive treatment is often left until the patient is stable or until it has been determined that exploratory surgery is not necessary.

In contrast, cat bites may seem innocuous as they often can't even been seen and only leave a small scab. Cats carry a species of bacteria called Pasteurella in the oral cavity that rapidly causes infection at the site of the bite. An abscess usually forms within 24-48 hours and is extremely painful. The animal usually develops a fever and may be lethargic. If the abscess does not rupture on its own, it should be lanced and flushed. Due to the aggressive nature of the bacteria, antibiotics are required to prevent spread of infection.

If you are bitten by a dog or cat, be sure to seek immediate medical attention, even if you do not feel the wounds are that severe. At the very least, the wounds should be washed immediately with soap and water. It is best to have any injuries assessed before complications develop.

Posted by **Christina Ryan** at August 2, 2010 10:45 a.m.

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