



## CAT SCRATCH DISEASE

### What is cat scratch disease and what causes it?

Cat Scratch Disease, or Cat Scratch Fever, is a disease of humans, not of cats. However, a cat scratch is often associated with the disease, although this is not believed to be the means by which infection occurs. The disease is caused by a bacterium-like organism called *Bartonella henselae*. The typical symptoms of the disease are mild fever, chills and lethargy accompanied by enlarged lymph nodes (usually single) and skin or conjunctival lesions. Most symptoms last for a few days only, but the enlarged lymph nodes may persist for weeks or months. In a minority of people a more severe disease may develop with high fever, weight loss, arthritis, enlarged liver or spleen, pneumonia or nervous signs. These more serious forms of the disease are often associated with underlying immunodeficiency states, such as HIV infection.

### How common is this disease?

It is not possible to give accurate estimates of the prevalence of Cat Scratch Disease in this country but it is probably a fairly common disease. Surveys carried out in the USA indicate that at least 15% of the population have been exposed to infection, but only a very small proportion of these reported having the disease. It is likely that many infections do not give rise to symptoms, or are of a trivial nature such as a mild 'cold'.

### How do humans become infected?

Although many cases of Cat Scratch Disease follow a cat scratch, this is not universally true and a few cases have occurred in people with no apparent contact with cats. Recent evidence suggests that a possible route of infection is by flea bite. Infected cats carry the micro-organism in their blood, where it can be present in extremely high numbers. When a flea feeds on an infected cat it ingests large numbers of *Bartonella*, some of which may be inoculated into a human the next time the flea takes a meal. Many cats with extremely high levels of organism in their blood do not show obvious signs of disease. It is mainly younger cats and kittens which carry the organism. They remain infectious for weeks to months, after which the organism disappears from the blood. It is not clear whether cats can be reinfected. There are no reported cases of any human being infected more than once.

### Is there a vaccine or treatment for Cat Scratch Disease?

There is no vaccine available against Cat Scratch Disease either for cats or for man. *Bartonella henselae* is sensitive to a number of antibiotics including erythromycin trimethoprim/sulpha enrofloxacin and doxycycline, but not penicillin, ampicillin or Clavulox. The disease is self-limiting, and mild cases will resolve without recourse to antibiotics.