Animal Bites – Rabies Isn’t the Only Concern

According to the Centers for Disease Control, dogs bite more than 4.7 million people every year, sending nearly 800,000 to a doctor with almost one-half of those going to the emergency room. And that’s just the bites that are reported. Dog bites are not the only concern, however, when you are going into an unfamiliar environment. And, let’s face it – in your job you are often going into an unfamiliar environment.

Sure, most animals have the potential to carry rabies. An often under-appreciated issue is the numerous types of bacteria that essentially are injected into your system from a bite or a scratch as the tooth or claw punctures the skin. There have been many postal workers who kept working thinking that the small bite from a small dog was a minor issue – until they woke up the next morning feeling very ill.

Cat scratch fever is not just a song by Ted Nugent – from the bite or scratch, you can develop fever, chills, nausea, vomiting and fatigue – in some instances without even realizing you have been scratched. A cat bite wound can turn into a serious infection within 12 hours, and over 40% of wounds do become infected. This time, Pink Floyd comes to mind since your hand may feel “just like two balloons”.

A few tips to avoid bites and/or scratches:
• Leather gloves and gauntlets should be used if you have to physically remove an animal – dead or alive.
• Do not approach an unfamiliar dog.
• Do not run from a dog and scream.
• Remain motionless (e.g., “be still like a tree”) when approached by an unfamiliar dog.
• If knocked over by a dog, roll into a ball and lie still (e.g., “be still like a log”).
• Avoid direct eye contact with a dog.
• Do not disturb a dog who is sleeping, eating or caring for puppies.
• Don’t pet customer’s dogs or put your hand out so they can smell you – they smelled you a mile away!

After contact with animals (whether or not you have been bitten or scratched) wash your hands with soap and water. The lather helps decrease the chance of infection. Wiping your hands on your pants increases that chance.

If you have been bitten or scratched, wash the wound. Get information from the dog/pet owner about vaccinations – i.e. are they up to date on their rabies vaccination. If there is a puncture, laceration or tear from a bite, medical treatment should be sought – especially if your tetanus vaccination is not up to date.

During your daily activities you will most likely encounter animals of all types. A few precautions can keep that experience a positive one.

References