

# YOUR **GPs** CAN TREAT THESE CONDITIONS

In January 2014, Eastern Health Alliance (EHA) launched the GPFIRST programme to encourage patients in eastern Singapore to see their general practitioners (GPs) for mild to moderate medical conditions rather than head to the emergency department first. In this regular series, our EHA community GPs offer advice on common ailments *Caring* readers might face.

Visit [www.gpfirst.sg](http://www.gpfirst.sg) or see your GP for more information on common conditions such as cuts, bruises, mild scalds, nausea, headaches, sprains and fevers. Read on to learn more about cat bites, and cuts and stitches.

## ANIMAL BITE

**Question:** I am a 30-year-old male. Last evening, I was bitten by a stray cat on my right leg, which resulted in a puncture wound with abrasions. I noticed some swelling and increased redness around the wound, and feel that the pain has worsened today. I am worried that the wound may be infected. Should I consult my GP first or go straight to the A&E?

**Answer:** Most likely, you have an infected cat bite. You can always consult your GP for an initial assessment.

Cat bites often cause infections. The deeper the bite, the greater the chances that the wound will become infected. If the bite has caused a puncture wound and seems to be infected (e.g. redness, warmth, swelling, pus or fluid oozing from the wound), you can visit a GP first to get it assessed. Most cat bites are treated with antibiotics. Your GP may also recommend a tetanus shot if you have not had one in the last five years, and schedule a review in one or two days. If the antibiotics do not reduce the infection, your GP may refer you to a specialist or to a hospital for further investigations



such as X-rays, or treatment such as antibiotics injected directly into the veins or even surgical debridement, if necessary.

General advice regarding a cat bite:

- A cat's mouth carries a large amount of bacteria that can cause serious infections. If you are bitten by a cat overseas, seek immediate medical attention to assess whether you need prophylactic immunisation against rabies. Rabies is a life-threatening (often fatal) viral infection that is uncommon in Singapore.
- If you are bitten by a stray or domestic cat, immediately wash the wound under running water. You may gently press the surrounding area of the wound to squeeze out a bit of blood or debris, which may help to flush out any bacteria that might have gotten into the wound. You may apply a sterile dressing to the wound.
- It is recommended to seek early medical attention even though some minor bites may heal without an infection. A serious infection can develop 24 to 48 hours after you get bitten.
- A bite on the hand is especially dangerous since the joints and tendons are just beneath the skin and the teeth can penetrate deep enough to cause a deep tissue infection. Therefore, it is important to seek immediate attention from a GP.



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To minimise the possibility of a cat bite, try not to pet or play with stray cats. Use interactive toys to play with your pet cat instead of offering your hands. Never try to separate fighting cats, even your pets, with your hands. Instead, use a blanket or sturdy piece of cardboard to try to separate them. Give them time to calm down before approaching them.

**Dr Sajeena Abdul Azeesu Kunju**

## CUTS AND STITCHES

**Question:** I am a 45-year-old housewife. I accidentally cut my left hand with my kitchen knife when I was cooking lunch this afternoon. As the wound was bleeding, I rinsed it under running tap water before drying to clean it, and realised that it was a long, deep cut. The bleeding seemed to have stopped when I bandaged it, but I wonder under what situation would I need to consult a GP or A&E doctor, and whether stitches would be required?

**Answer:** You have an open wound resulting from a knife laceration. You can visit your GP for an initial assessment.

Usually stitches are required when the wound is deep enough to cause excessive scarring. The skin consists of four layers: the epidermis, dermis, subcutaneous fats and deep fascia. Stitching/suturing is required when the dermis layer is penetrated. Clean, uninfected lacerations on any parts of the body of a healthy patient can be sutured primarily for up to 18 hours (facial wounds for up to 24 hours) following the injury without significant risk of wound infection.

Suturing may not be appropriate for wounds that are contaminated with foreign bodies that cannot be removed completely and infected tissue or wounds that do not receive medical attention early. These wounds will be treated with regular dressing and cleaning as stitching them up will lead to an increased risk of infection.

Your GP will:

- assess the wound
- identify possible contamination or foreign bodies
- look for neurovascular compromise (testing the strength and sensation of your hands and fingers, as well as checking for your pulse)
- assess suitability for tetanus prophylaxis
- look for risk factors affecting healing, such as diabetes mellitus

Your GP may refer you to the A&E if X-rays are required to check for foreign bodies or broken bones or if there are more serious injuries involving the nerves, blood vessels or tendons in the limbs.

If stitching is required, your GP will first clean and wash the wound. He or she will then inject local anaesthesia around the wound to reduce pain during suturing. After your GP has sutured the wound, he or she will cover the area with a bandage or gauze. Your GP may also prescribe some antiseptic creams to put over the suture site. Some wounds can be closed using tissue glue instead of stitches, but this will depend on your GP's assessment.

It is important to take care of your wound so that your cut heals well and does not break open or get infected.

Here is some general advice:

- Keep the sutured site dry and covered with a bandage or gauze.
- After a few days, you can gently wash the sutured site with soap and water whenever you take a shower.
- Do not soak your wound in water as getting it too wet will slow down healing and increase your chances of getting an infection.
- Avoid activities or sports that could hurt the area of your sutures for one to two weeks as the sutures can break and the laceration can open up again.
- Return to your GP if the sutures break or the cut opens up, if you get a fever or start to have redness, warmth and swelling around the laceration or pus draining out. Some yellow, clear fluid draining out from the cut in the first few days is normal.



Your GP will review your wound when the sutures are due to be taken out. The timing for suture removal depends on the site of laceration ranging from five days for the face to 10 days for the lower limbs.

After your sutures are removed, you should protect the scar from the sun by using sunscreen on the area.

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