

Bites and Scratches: Preventing Common and Potentially Severe Injuries

By Michelle O'Neill, Sr. Risk Advisor, Preferred Employers Insurance

Over the past six years, animal bites and scratches have comprised at least 63% of veterinary staff injuries in Preferred Employers Insurance's (PEI) workers' compensation program. All too often, bite and scratch injuries in veterinary practices are viewed as "just part of the job" and not paid much attention. But without proper medical treatment, they can become infected, leading to pain, loss of work, and extensive medical treatment. Bite and scratch injuries can range from superficial scratches to puncture wounds and deep, open cuts. Bite wounds can also result in crush injuries. Wounds that break the skin can cause serious infection, including osteomyelitis (infection of the bone), septic arthritis (infection of the joint), or septic synovitis (infection of a synovial structure like a tendon sheath). All bites and scratches should be reported to a supervisor or manager, even if considered minor. Due to the risk of serious injury, consider seeking medical treatment for all bites and scratches.

Bite and Scratch Prevention Plan

Because patients experiencing pain or anxiousness oftentimes will lash out, every practice should have a focused bite and scratch prevention plan incorporated into their safety program. The plan should include management responsibilities, employee responsibilities, training, standard operating procedures (SOPs), facilities design, an approved tools and equipment list, a periodic self-audit to measure effectiveness, and injury management elements.

Practice management is key to ensuring bite and scratch prevention is engrained in the practice's culture.

Management responsibilities should include:

- Developing, distributing, and providing staff training on the practice's bite and scratch prevention SOPs, and ensuring their implementation
- Educating staff on common behaviors associated with fear-based aggression
- Designing and equipping facilities to reduce or eliminate the situations that lead to bites and scratches
- Identifying and providing tools and equipment needed to prevent bites and scratches, including personal protective equipment

- Regularly auditing the effectiveness of the practice's bite and scratch prevention procedures, training, facilities, tools, and equipment, and reviewing injury investigations and reports
- Developing and distributing injury reporting and medical treatment procedures to all staff

The bite and scratch prevention plan will not be effective without employees' engagement and participation.



Employee responsibilities should include:

- Attending and participating in training
- Following established SOPs and safety rules
- Reporting injuries to management

Even though veterinary staff encounter the risk of being bitten or scratched nearly every day, they can be equipped to care for themselves and their patients with a reduced risk of injury. Veterinary staff should be reminded that keeping yourself safe benefits you and your patient! ■



Bite and Scratch Prevention Training

Bite and scratch prevention training should lay a foundation for how to read and respond to the normal behavior and responses of cats, dogs, and other patients to stressors like fear and anxiety.

Training should include:

- Assessing and re-assessing a patient's anxiety level
- Implementing proper animal handling techniques
- Choosing appropriate precautions or restraints, when necessary
- Identifying strategies to minimize animal fear and aggression
- Selecting and using appropriate personal protective equipment

Meaningful information to make these determinations can be found by:

- Reviewing and notating the patient's medical records and kennel charts
- Discussing the patient's anxiety level and behavior with the client prior to treatment
- Reading the patient's body language

The training should also include identifying what specific precautions or restraints are required for moderate-to-high patient anxiety levels, including the use of:

- Treats
- Pheromone spray
- Blanket/towel
- Extra help from staff members
- Muzzle
- Sedation
- Alternate appointment schedule during a quieter time of the day
- Admitting the patient directly into the exam room
- Staff being present in the exam room before the animal patient comes in
- Providing medication to address anxiety prior to appointments