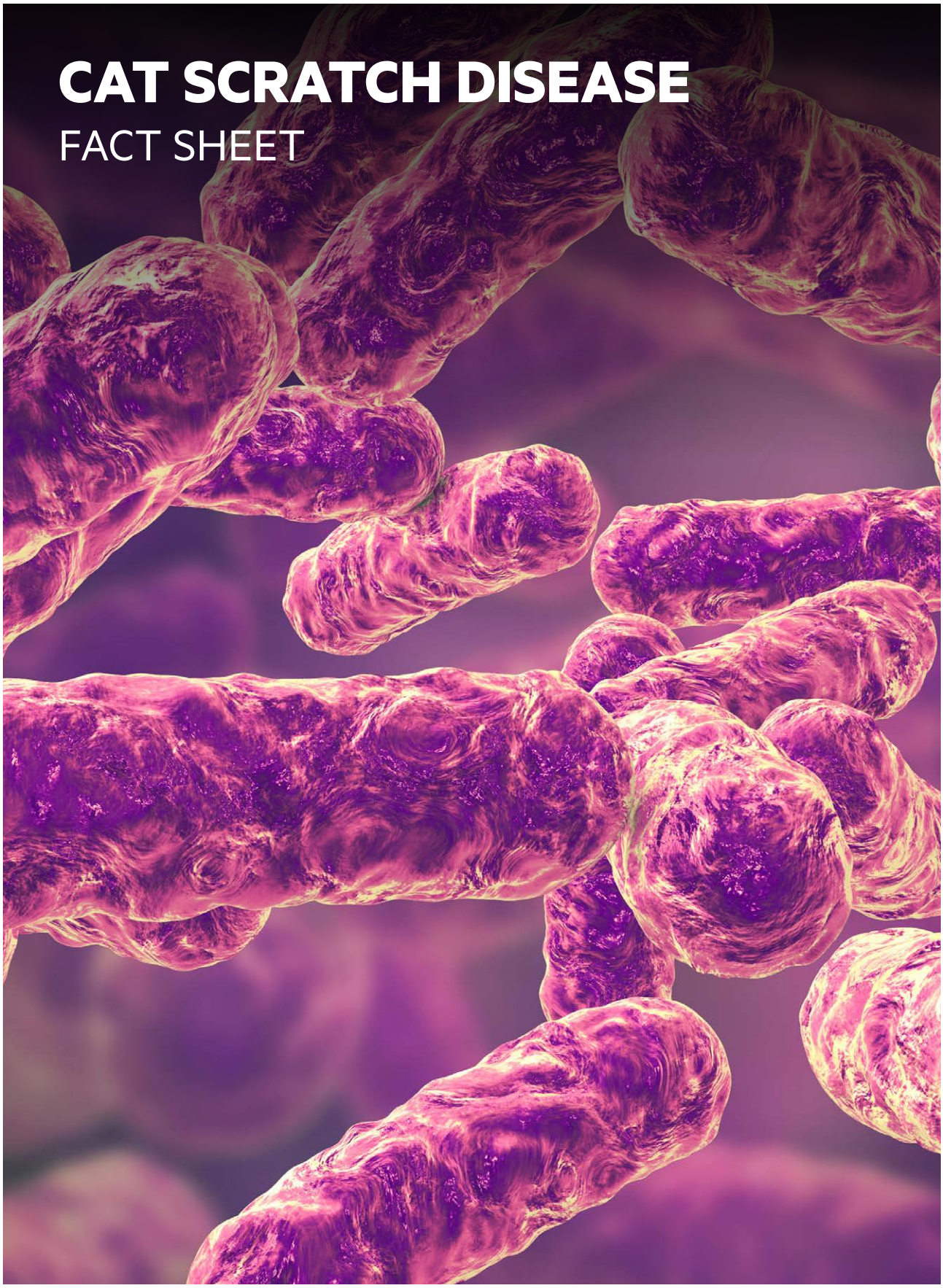
QUEENSLAND MUSEUM

CAT SCRATCH DISEASE

FACT SHEET



Q26-027

Queensland Government

WHAT IS CAT SCRATCH DISEASE?

Cat scratch disease (CSD), also called cat scratch fever, is a bacterial zoonotic infection caused by *Bartonella henselae*. The bacteria can be transmitted from infected cats to humans.

B. henselae bacteria are present in Australian cats.

Natural hosts

Both domestic and wild cats frequently carry *B. henselae*.

Who is at risk?

- Vets and vet nurses, animal rescue carers and volunteers, cat owners (particularly children and immunocompromised people), rangers, rescue facility workers and scientists who work with cats.
- Anyone who comes into contact with feral cats.

Most cases are mild, but about 10% result in hospitalisation.

How is it spread?

B. henselae is maintained in cat populations through cat fleas (*Ctenocephalides felis*). Fleas ingest the bacteria when feeding on an infected cat's blood and then transmit them to other cats through flea faeces. Cats become bacteraemic – having bacteria in their bloodstream – but rarely show symptoms. The bacteria are present in infected cats' blood and saliva, and also on their claws and fur from grooming and flea dirt.

Humans are incidental hosts; they do not maintain or spread CSD.

Kittens less than a year old are more likely to carry the bacteria than adult cats and so pose the highest risk.

CSD can be transmitted from an infected cat to humans by direct contact with saliva through bites, scratches or licking a break in the skin, such as an open wound, or a mucous membrane (e.g. eyes, nose or mouth).

Humans become infected directly from cats, but there is no evidence of human-to-human transmission.



What are the symptoms?

In animals

Cats are the only animals affected by this disease and they usually show no symptoms.

In humans

A mild, flu-like illness may develop. More serious and rare complications include vision or neurological issues.

Initial symptoms may include:

- a small bump/blister at the scratch site
- fever
- fatigue
- headache
- loss of appetite
- muscle aches or joint pain
- sore throat
- swollen lymph nodes near the scratch site (e.g. neck, armpit, groin).

Symptoms usually resolve on their own.

How can I prevent infection?

There are no vaccines available for CSD. Measures to avoid this disease include:

- Avoid rough play with cats.
- Practise good hygiene and wound care, such as washing scratches immediately.
- Control fleas if you own pets.

Simple hygiene for both you and your cat will reduce the risk of disease transmission.

What treatments are available?

Most CSD cases do not require treatment as the disease usually resolves on its own; any treatment given is aimed at easing symptoms. Some cases, particularly in immunocompromised people, may require antibiotic treatment.

If you think you may have been exposed to CSD, please contact your doctor or public health agency for further advice.

You can still safely own cats – CSD only affects a small number of people per year.

Cover: A computer illustration of *Bartonella henselae* bacteria. Courtesy: Alamy/Science Photo Library
Page 2: Wash cat scratches and bites immediately to reduce risk. Courtesy: Alamy/Lenar Nigmatullin

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