HEALTH BASICS

Biting

Biting is the act of closing teeth on skin, food, or objects, sometimes causing injury or infection risk.

WHAT IT IS
Closing the teeth on skin, food, or another object

WHERE IT COMES UP
Child behaviour, injuries, eating, and animal encounters

WHY IT MATTERS
Can damage tissue or expose a wound to infection

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a disease or diagnosis

WHO TO ASK
Primary care, urgent care, dentist, or public health service

HOW IT IS CHECKED
Wound examination; imaging or blood tests when needed

Overview

Biting means closing the teeth on skin, food, clothing, or another object. It is an action, not a disease or diagnosis.

Most biting is part of ordinary eating. Young children may also bite while teething, exploring, communicating frustration, or reacting to crowded or stressful situations. Adults and older children may bite objects or themselves because of habit, stress, pain, or sensory needs.

A bite becomes a medical concern when it damages skin, teeth, or deeper tissue. Human and animal mouths contain bacteria. If a bite breaks the skin, those bacteria can enter the wound and cause an infection.

The amount of risk is shaped by what caused the bite, where it occurred, how deeply the skin was damaged, and the health of the person who was bitten. Bites involving hands, joints, the face, or deep punctures often need closer assessment.

How it works

Teeth can press, puncture, cut, or tear tissue. A shallow bite may leave temporary tooth marks without breaking the skin. A stronger bite can cause bruising, bleeding, punctures, or crushed tissue beneath a small surface wound.

Different bites tend to produce different injuries. Dog bites may crush or tear tissue. Cat teeth can make narrow punctures that carry bacteria deep below the skin. A human bite can introduce mouth bacteria and, in unusual circumstances involving blood, raise questions about blood-borne infections.

A punch to someone's mouth can also cause a human bite injury. A tooth may cut the skin over the knuckles and carry bacteria into a tendon or joint. The wound can look minor even when deeper structures are involved.

Normal chewing spreads force across teeth built for that purpose. Biting hard objects such as ice, metal, or hard plastic can crack a tooth or damage a filling. Holding objects between the teeth can also injure the mouth or create a choking risk.

In young children, biting is often a form of behaviour rather than an attempt to cause serious harm. A child may not yet have the words or self-control to manage excitement, frustration, tiredness, or competition for a toy.

Why it matters for your health

A bite that does not break the skin is much less likely to become infected. It may still cause bruising or tenderness.

When skin is broken, infection is the main concern. The risk is greater when bacteria are pushed into a deep puncture, when damaged tissue has poor blood flow, or when the wound is close to a tendon, bone, or joint.

Your tetanus protection may also need review. Tetanus is a serious infection caused by bacteria found in the environment. Bite wounds contaminated with saliva are treated as potentially contaminated wounds when clinicians assess vaccination needs.

Some mammal bites can expose a person to rabies. Rabies risk is based on the animal species, its behaviour and health, local rabies activity, whether the animal can be observed or tested, and the circumstances of the contact. Public health services help make this assessment.

Biting can also matter without a skin wound. Repeated biting of hard objects may damage teeth. Repeated self-biting may cause sores or scarring and can be a reason to ask about pain, stress, communication, or sensory needs.

What can go wrong

Conditions and injuries related to biting include:

HIV transmission from a bite is rare. Saliva alone is not considered a route of HIV transmission. A clinician may assess the situation differently if there was visibly bloody saliva, deep broken skin, or direct blood-to-blood contact. Hepatitis B and hepatitis C may also be considered according to the exposure and vaccination history.

Seek emergency help for bleeding that will not stop with firm pressure, severe face or neck trauma, breathing difficulty, loss of consciousness, or a major loss of tissue.

Prompt emergency assessment is also appropriate for an eye injury, exposed bone or tendon, loss of feeling or movement, or a deep wound with major crushing.

Arrange urgent, same-day medical advice for a bite that breaks the skin and involves the hand, face, genitals, a joint, or a deep puncture. The same applies to a human bite, a possible rabies exposure, spreading redness, worsening pain, pus, fever, or red streaks from the wound. People with reduced immunity, poor circulation, or conditions that slow healing may need earlier assessment.

A minor mark on intact skin can usually be cleaned and watched. Repeated child biting, self-biting, or object biting without an immediate injury is generally a routine issue to discuss with primary care, a dentist, or a child development service.

- Skin and soft-tissue infection: increasing redness, warmth, swelling, pain, pus, or fever after a bite
- Tendon, nerve, joint, or bone injury: possible after deep bites, hand bites, or crushing injuries
- Dental injury: a cracked tooth, broken filling, mouth cut, or jaw injury
- Tetanus exposure: considered according to the wound and vaccination history
- Rabies exposure: possible after certain mammal bites or scratches
- Blood-borne virus exposure: sometimes assessed after a human bite involving broken skin and blood
- Choking or inhalation: possible when a bitten object breaks into a loose piece
- Repeated self-injury: skin damage caused by ongoing self-biting

What you can do

If a bite breaks the skin, act promptly:

For an animal bite, note the animal's species, ownership, vaccination information if known, behaviour, and whether it can be located safely. Do not put yourself at risk trying to catch an animal. Contact local public health or animal-control services if rabies could be a concern.

Ask a clinician whether you need:

For biting between young children, respond calmly and separate them. Care for the child who was bitten, then use simple language such as "Biting hurts." Avoid shaming or biting the child back.

Keep a brief record if biting continues. Note what happened beforehand, the time of day, signs of tiredness or hunger, and what helped. This can reveal patterns and gives a paediatric or childcare professional useful information.

If hard-object biting is damaging teeth, arrange a dental visit. For repeated self-biting, record where and when it happens and discuss it during routine care. There may be nothing useful to test; the first step is often understanding triggers and checking for pain or injury.

- Wash the wound thoroughly with soap and running water
- Apply firm pressure with clean gauze or cloth if it is bleeding
- Remove rings or tight jewellery before swelling develops
- Cover the wound with a clean dressing
- Do not seal a deep bite with household glue or adhesive strips
- Record when and where it happened and what caused it
- A closer examination for tendon, nerve, joint, bone, or tooth damage
- A tetanus vaccination review
- Antibiotics like amoxicillin or doxycycline , which are not required for every bite
- Rabies treatment or public health assessment
- Blood tests or follow-up after a significant human bite

Common questions

Does every bite need antibiotics?

No. Antibiotics are chosen according to the depth, location, cause, timing, and infection risk of the wound. They do not replace thorough cleaning or treatment of damaged tissue.

Should an animal bite always be treated for rabies?

No. Rabies treatment is based on a public health risk assessment. Because treatment works best before illness develops, seek prompt advice rather than waiting for signs of infection.

Is biting common in young children?

It can occur during early childhood, especially before children can express needs clearly. A calm, consistent response and attention to triggers are usually more helpful than punishment. Repeated or severe biting can be discussed with a paediatric or child development service.

Can a bite look small but still be serious?

Yes. A puncture may close at the surface while bacteria or damaged tissue remain deeper. This is especially important with cat bites, hand wounds, bites over joints, and cuts over the knuckles after striking someone's teeth.

What if the skin was not broken?

Wash the area and check for bruising, swelling, pain, or problems moving it. Infection is unlikely through intact skin. Seek care if there may be a crushing injury or if pain and swelling are significant.

Can biting damage teeth?

Normal biting and chewing are expected uses of healthy teeth. Biting very hard objects can crack teeth or fillings. Dental assessment is appropriate for a chipped tooth, ongoing sensitivity, pain when biting, or a loose adult tooth.

Sources

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