

Dog Care: External and Internal Parasites

by the American Animal Hospital Association

Summer is here: fresh-cut grass, birds in the trees, burgers on the grill, and of course, pesky parasites. With the advent of a new season, it's important to take precautions to either prevent or treat parasite infestation in pets. Parasites not only affect our furry friends, but also can be passed on to us.

What makes pets such a prime target for parasites? Animals provide the perfect living environment. Blood, sweat, and tears isn't just a rock band from the 60's--to the parasite, they're a three-course lunch. Pet hair also is a warm, protective environment and a means of transportation to another host.

Skin deep

The most common little buggers having a party at your pets' expense are ectoparasites--fleas, ticks and mites--which live on or burrow into their hosts' skin. Fleas are particularly pesky, since they not only infest your pet, but also can take over your home. The good news is that they're fairly easy to spot--you'll probably notice your pet's discomfort and scratching right off. You may even see fleas in his fur. Fleas are small (a little more than one millimeter), wingless, brown, and fast moving.

Some dogs and cats also can be allergic to fleas' saliva, which causes their skin to become inflamed. In addition, if the fleas carry pathogens, cats may easily become infected because they ingest about 50 percent of the fleas on their coats while grooming.

If your pet has fleas, your first thought might be to try an old-fashioned flea dip. But these dips can be highly toxic, inducing severe side effects like vomiting, fever, seizures, coma, and possibly death. Instead of dipping your dog or cat, you can easily apply a drop to your pet's skin that will kill fleas and prevent adults from laying eggs. Your veterinarian can suggest safe, effective products for your pet.

A hitchhiker

Another common parasite, especially during the summer months, is the tick. Ticks can be found looking for a free ride almost anywhere in most climates, though they prefer to hang out in wooded, damp, and grassy areas before attaching themselves to your pet. Some tick bites may be harmless; others can cause anemia, skin damage, irritation, and hypersensitivity. Some of the most common diseases transmitted by tick bites are Lyme disease, tick-borne fever, and Rocky Mountain spotted fever. If untreated, these diseases can cause severe health problems and can be fatal.

So what are some of the signs of a tick-borne disease? Common symptoms of Lyme disease are arthritis, lameness, depression, and loss of appetite. Tick-borne fever can cause weakness, a cough, labored breathing, fatigue, and discharge from the nose or eyes. The symptoms of Rocky Mountain spotted fever are similar to those of tick-borne fever. Or more generally, you may

find that your pet isn't eating and is lethargic, depressed, and feverish. If any of these symptoms occur, it's imperative that you take your ailing buddy to the veterinarian as soon as possible. The best preventative is to check your pet's skin and fur after spending a day in the woods, at the local lake, or even in your own backyard. If you try removing a tick the wrong way, though, you could hurt your friend. Don't try to burn it off with a match. The smell of the smoke won't make the tick loosen its grip, and the match could burn your furry companion. An alcohol swab rubbed or placed around the area may help loosen the kung fu grip of the tick. Using tweezers, grab the tick as close to the head as possible and slowly pull it out. If you flush the tick down the toilet before killing it, there is no promise that it won't crawl back up at an inopportune time. The best way to kill a tick is to place it in a sealed jar with alcohol.

It might be a mite

Another critter to watch for is the mite. Lots of pet owners are familiar with ear mites. If you notice your pet scratching his ear intensely or biting himself, he could have ear mites. These pests also leave a brown or black crust on the outer ear.

Another type of mite is scabies. After burrowing into your pet's skin, scabies mites lay eggs. Once they hatch, the larvae feed on your pet's skin and release a secretion that causes severe itching. Take your pet to the veterinarian immediately if you suspect scabies mites, because they are highly contagious, and the excessive scratching they cause can lead to infections. When treating mites, your best bet is to take your pet to your veterinarian rather than to try an at-home remedy or an over-the-counter medicine that may not be effective.

Crawling in and crawling out

Almost all puppies and kittens have some type of internal parasite lurking in them, feeding on the blood and protein of its hosts. These parasites can affect your pet's ability to absorb nutrients, and without treatment, they can potentially damage the lining of the intestinal tract. The most common internal parasites are tapeworms, hookworms, whipworms, and roundworms. Tapeworms can be passed onto your pet through fleas, which sometimes carry this parasite in its larval stage. Outside pets also can get them by eating infected rodents. If you find your pet is constantly licking his anal area, your best bet is to visually inspect the area and his stool for bits of tapeworm, which look like rice.

Hookworms attach themselves to your pet's intestinal lining, causing bloody or dark diarrhea. Whipworms, which can be found in the large intestine, also can cause diarrhea. If you notice blood in your pet's stool, collect a sample to take into your veterinarian, because the worms and eggs are only visible by microscope.

Last, but of course not least, is the roundworm, which lives in the small intestine. These worms may cause vomiting and resemble strands of spaghetti in your pet's stool. They are easily transmitted to humans, especially children, and can cause serious human health problems, including blindness.

An ounce of prevention

How can you protect your family and pet from these common parasites? If your children enjoy playing in the sandbox, remember that the neighborhood cat might, too. If the sandbox has become his litter box, your children run the risk of contracting roundworms through fecal-oral transmission. Children are more prone to roundworm, but avid or amateur gardeners also need to beware. That neighborhood cat may be using your garden for his litter box as well. The best preventatives are to cover up the sandbox, wear gloves when gardening, and constantly wash your hands after being outside.

Collecting a stool sample each year and taking your pet to your veterinarian will help ensure that he is worm free. Most heartworm medicines now contain a preventative for whipworm, roundworm, and hookworm, so be sure to follow your veterinarian's recommended dosages. In addition, pay close attention to your pet. If you notice your furry companion scraping his bottom on the carpet, scratching his ears, vomiting, passing diarrhea, turning up his nose at the food bowl, or just not being himself, take the hint that something is wrong and schedule an appointment with your veterinarian immediately. Parasites can be a problem any time of the year, but a few preventative measures will protect the health of all of your loved ones.



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