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Ask the Vet: The truth about ticks on your animals

Ah, beautiful! Spring is in full force -- the trees, the flowers, the outdoor activities. But wait - what's that? Could it be a tick?!

Yes, tick season is also in full force, and the mild winter we had is expected to allow ticks (and fleas) to develop earlier and in higher numbers than usual.

Local veterinarians are already seeing and hearing plenty of reports about tick exposures on both pets and people. While tick populations vary across the country, recent years also have seen increasing numbers of both ticks and their diseases in the Great Lakes region and down the East Coast.

Many people believe ticks to be found only in the deeper woods. But because a majority of ticks travel by way of deer, they can easily be found most anywhere deer go, including roadsides and fields -- common places for us and our pets to exercise. The ticks wait on the taller plants and grab hold of any passersby. They are very patient and can even survive up to a year without eating!

Their meal consists simply of blood, but it is during the time they are attached that other disease-causing organisms they may carry can gain access to the host's blood and tissues.

Please check your pets for any ticks when coming indoors, especially after walks and prolonged exercise. Ticks can be walking on the hair or skin anywhere, but often attach themselves in crevices or areas with little to no hair -- like around the ears, inside the upper legs, between toes, and near skin folds.

The immature life stages of ticks are quite small, so a fine toothed flea comb is often helpful in searching.

When an attached tick is found, care must be taken to reduce disease exposure. First, for your own safety, please wear gloves (preferably latex-type gloves) anytime you are handling ticks -- humans are similarly affected by several tick-borne diseases. Secondly, you need to be careful not to break off the head of the tick. Leaving the head attached may cause inflammation and possible infection.

Tweezers can be used to remove a tick by grasping but not crushing the tick next to the skin at the point of attachment. You do not want to squeeze the body -- this could expel fluid back into the host, thereby increasing the risk of disease.

An easier method is to use a specifically designed tick removal tool. You can buy one, or you can make one in a pinch pretty simply. To make such a tool, use a flat stiff material like an old ID card and cut a deep pointy "V" into one side. Slide the flat card on the skin so that the tick is seated into the deep "V." Push and elevate the card with steady yet gentle force until the tick fatigues and releases from the skin. This often takes 30 to 90 seconds.

Once removed, cleansing the skin with mild soap and water is recommended. Other removal methods using matches, nail polish or butter are ineffective and may actually make matters worse.

Several tick-borne diseases do take several hours to transmit to the pet, so the sooner the tick can be removed the lower the risk of disease.

More than a dozen tick associated diseases are recognized, with new ones still being studied. The most well known include Lyme Disease and Rocky Mountain spotted fever. Clinical signs of tick transmitted diseases often include lameness, fever, lethargy and/or joint swellings. And recent studies are showing a prevalence of co-infections -- the existence of more than one infection at a time. Co-infections may make diagnosis and treatments more difficult.

The best way to prevent tick-borne disease in your pet is to stop the ticks from attaching in the first place. The use of a safe and effective topical product is recommended for at-risk pets. Your veterinarian can help you understand expectations and decide which product is best for your pet's lifestyle. Some products should not be used for cats or for dogs with certain health conditions.

Vaccination for prevention of Lyme disease is recommended for at-risk dogs especially those who travel into high incidence areas.

Despite an increased presence of ticks, we can still enjoy our outdoor activities with our furry friends all year long.

You can put your worries away by practicing tick prevention with combing, use of an appropriate preventive product and knowing how to remove a tick safely.