

## ***Ask the Vet: The Ins and Outs of Tapeworms in Family Pets***

**By Craig Selby, DVM – Daisy Hill Animal Hospital, Ltd.**

The lowly tapeworm. In our companion animals it enjoys a life of quiet survival in the small intestine as it has done for millions of years. In fact, fossilized tapeworms dating from 270 million years ago have been identified in shark fossils. Tapeworms may infect a variety of species; the resulting disease varies in severity.

Small animal veterinarians treat patients to eliminate tapeworms commonly, and we see an increase in tapeworm infection frequency in the late summer for one simple reason: the flea is the most common source of infection. As summer wears on in this part of the country, the typical surge in the flea population enhances the spread of tapeworms. Tapeworms need 1-2 months to fully develop after finding a new host; therefore, adult tapeworm infection usually follows exposure to troublesome fleas (and rarely lice) by a couple of months. Dogs and cats with a lifestyle that allows them to hunt and consume wild rodents or rabbits may be infected with tapeworms of a different species than the tapeworm transmitted by the flea. Clinically we often talk about the “flea tapeworm” and the “rabbit tapeworm” in describing the different species.

Unlike other parasites that live freely in the intestinal tract, the head of the tapeworms attaches to the wall of the small intestine using special hook-like mouthparts. As it matures, small segments, or proglottids, separate and pass with the feces in hopes of spreading infection. The proglottids, which shed intermittently, resemble grains of rice or cucumber seeds and can be found either on the pet’s fur under the tail (often still moist and moving) or on the pets bedding (dried).

The microscopic eggs that are released from the dried, cracked open proglottids are eaten by the flea larva or rodent/rabbit. Next the flea or rodent/rabbit acting as the intermediate host is eaten by the pet who is the primary host where the tapeworm matures. Flea ingestion occurs frequently when pets lick or bite at themselves in response to itchy fleas.

Luckily, tapeworms rarely cause major health problems in our companion pets. Sometimes scooting is seen in response to anal or perianal skin irritation. Diarrhea and flatulence are occasionally reported. In very young pets, heavy tapeworm infestations can be more serious. The young or weak may require fluid or nutritional support due to vomiting, diarrhea, or mass blockage of the intestinal tract caused by tapeworms. Though we rarely see more than the small proglottid segments, chains of proglottids 2-3 feet long may be passed in feces, or vomited.

Other animals like horses, cattle, pigs and fish have their own species of tapeworms. Horses can ingest infected mites in the feed, potentially leading to colic disease. Some tapeworms of cattle and fish can encyst in muscle and are potentially infective if the meat is not properly cooked before eating.

While it is possible for humans (usually children) to become infected with the same species of tapeworm that infects dogs and cats, it is rare. An infected flea must be accidentally ingested by the child. Disease is typically mild, is confined to the intestinal tract, and is fairly easily treated. Parasite prevention in pets and emphasis on hygiene is the best prevention. All pet feces should be disposed of properly, especially from yards and play areas. Frequent hand washing and avoidance of contaminated areas are a must for children.

Consult your veterinarian regarding treatment for tapeworm infection if it occurs in your pet. Remember, for flea related infections comprehensive flea control is a critical step that must not be ignored. It is expected that reinfection will occur if treatment and prevention of fleas is overlooked. This includes effective treatment of all pets in the environment, and continued diligent prevention. For the hunting dogs and cats that are contracting tapeworms from their prey, curbing that activity is also desired to prevent reinfection. Your veterinarian can discuss the most effective options of both treatment and prevention for your individual situation.

