

Ask the Vet: With Spring Come Parasites!

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Yes, springtime brings new growth, lovely flowers, and warm breezes. But it also ushers in a rising incidence, both internal and external, of parasites in our pets. Now to be honest, veterinarians see a wide variety of parasites nearly every single day despite the season. Still some populations of pests increase with the arrival of warmer weather, and our pets are at increased risk. With our recent mild winter temperatures, we will likely see an earlier emergence of several parasites – so be prepared!

Also consider that many parasites of the world are zoonotic (zo'-uh-not'-ic), that is, able to be transmitted from animals to humans. This goes for both external or skin parasites and the internal intestinal parasites of our companion animals. The common mantra that 'prevention is the best medicine' is so very appropriate when it comes to parasites.

The onset of warmer weather is probably best associated with increases in flea and tick populations. Fleas are spread by feral cats, raccoons, and opossums and they are easily shared with our pets. Once the flea feeds on blood, it lays up to 50 eggs a day, and the rapid life cycle turns releasing more fleas into our midst. Itching, hair thinning and skin redness are common signs of a flea infestation.

Even indoor-only pets can get fleas. Outdoor pets near doorways, indoor/outdoor pets with inadequate flea prevention, and people or their belongings are sources of entry for fleas to move indoors. Once one pet has fleas, essentially all pets in the environment are likely to have fleas as fleas can spread and multiply quite quickly. The disease Bartonellosis (cat scratch disease) can be spread between cats by fleas and transmitted to humans. Also, the flea can act as an intermediate host for tapeworms, an intestinal parasite. More on that in a moment.

Ticks, which are a type of arachnid, also feed on blood and are typically found on and transported by deer, small mammals, or birds. They are, unfortunately, just as happy with a dog, cat, or human blood meal. Trips into wooded areas or tall grasses are the most common places to find them, but they may be right in your back yard, too. Some ticks are also known to harbor diseases, transmitted during the biting and feeding process. These include Lyme, Ehrlichia, and Rocky Mountain spotted fever.

Other creepy skin arachnids are found on some pets' skin, too. Ear and mange mites cause terribly severe skin inflammation and itchiness.

Internally, a variety of other harmful parasites that have lovely, descriptive names such as Heartworms, Roundworms, Hookworms, Whipworms, and Tapeworms may be hiding out in your pet.

As mentioned, the warmer weather will bring the inevitable onslaught of mosquitos, which through their bites can transmit heartworm parasites to unprotected pets. Dogs and cats are the predominant species that can contract the potentially life-threatening blood infection. The heartworm can also infect coyotes, wolves, and pet ferrets. Use of a monthly preventive all year for your dog, cat, and ferret provides protection.

Roundworms hang out in the intestines and shed microscopic eggs into the feces of many species. Ingestion of the eggs or a rodent (mice) with roundworms can infect your pet. Sometimes diarrhea and vomiting are signs of infection, but many pets exhibit coughing and a failure to thrive. Roundworms are also zoonotic. During its life cycle, roundworms migrate through tissues in the body including the liver and lungs. Larval Migrans is a disease most often occurring in children in which the victim can have fever, pain, and even ocular damage that can lead to permanent vision loss. Special attention must be paid to hygiene for children in sandboxes where feral cats may have deposited feces.

Hookworms and Whipworms on the other hand attach to the lining of the intestines to feed on blood. In doing so, they create intestinal inflammation, and if severe enough cause anemia and bloody diarrhea. Immature pets are at highest risk. Some hookworm larva can even penetrate the skin to get into the body tissues and then migrate to the intestines.

Tapeworm infections of dogs and cats are fairly common and typically don't cause significant disease, although there are some tapeworm species that do cause harm. When pets have tapeworms, they have contracted them from either exposure to (and swallowing of) fleas, or from hunting and eating an infected rodent, rabbit, bird, or reptile. Tapeworm larvae need an intermediate host in which to develop before they are infective to our pets, and cannot directly infect another pet.

Luckily, the veterinary community now has a wide variety of products and strategies available to help protect your animal companions from all of the above mentioned parasites. Typically a combination of products is chosen for your pet's specific lifestyle, and may include oral or topical options. These need to be given or applied according to directions, as breaks in protection can allow parasites to get a foothold and establish an infection that may be difficult to clear.

A physical exam is recommended anytime a pet has itchiness or red skin, preferably when it is first noticed. Fecal exams on our pets are always recommended at least annually and also when there is abnormal stool like diarrhea, or episodes of vomiting. Parasites are often the initiating cause of an assortment of health problems.

Prevention really is the best medicine!