

Intestinal Parasites of Dogs and Cats: Guidelines for Pet Owners

As pet owners, most of us are familiar with “Worm” problems with our pets. We encounter worms mostly in young puppies and kittens after we purchase them from the pet store, the breeder or adopt them from the humane society or the animal shelter. This article serves as a simple guideline about the most important canine and feline intestinal parasites including their life cycles, mode of transmission, treatment, prevention strategies, and zoonotic potential (risk of making humans sick). Intestinal parasites can be divided into 4-5 broad categories that include more than 90% of the infections commonly diagnosed by veterinarians. These are hookworms, roundworms, whipworms, tapeworms, giardia and coccidia. Most of these infections if left untreated can cause severe sickness and even death especially in young pets.

Hookworms

These are blood-sucking parasites that can cause severe anemia and death due to acute blood loss. Adult worms in the intestine lay hundreds of eggs daily that are passed into the pet’s stool. Infective larvae hatch from the eggs in the environment and infect the pets after being licked. Young children can get skin lesions called cutaneous larva migrans if exposed to hookworm larvae.

Roundworms

Roundworms are big cream-colored worms that are sometimes passed with the stool of young pets. Puppies and kittens acquire the infection through the milk of the mother. The adult worms in the intestine cause unthriftiness and sometimes, intestinal obstruction. Children infected with larvae of roundworms can develop a condition called visceral larva migrans caused by the abnormal migration of these worms through the body organs.

Whipworms

These parasites only affect dogs and can cause bloody diarrhea.

Tapeworms

Tapeworms have an interesting life cycle. Their eggs are ingested by flea larvae or mice and develop into the infective stage in the flea or mouse. Dogs and cats get tapeworm infection if they ingest the flea while grooming or eat a mouse when they hunt. Owners sometimes notice the rice-like segments of the tapeworms around the anus of their pets. Tapeworms can also infect people.

Giardia and Coccidia

These are single cell parasites causing abdominal pain and watery to bloody diarrhea in dogs and cats. Giardia can cause severe diarrhea in people.

Diagnosis of Intestinal Parasites

The intestinal parasites can be diagnosed by fecal examination at the veterinary hospital. Definitive diagnosis of Giardia infection can also be made by a rapid immune test that we can run in the office called a SNAP test. Since dogs and cats with these parasite infections may experience periods with no symptoms it is important to diagnose and treat these infections before they make you pet sick. When you bring a stool sample from your pets at their yearly checkup we will perform a fecal flotation and microscopic examination for detection of any silent infections. Bring a fecal sample whenever your pet is examined for any sort of gastrointestinal disturbance or even just when he or she just isn't feeling right or has a poor appetite.

Treatment Options

Young Puppies and Kittens: Regular de-worming at 2-3 weeks intervals starting at 2-3 weeks of age until 3-4 months of age.

Adults: Monthly de-worming in dogs is part of their regular heartworm disease prevention program. We have chosen heartworm prevention medicines not only for their safety and efficacy but also for their inclusion of medication to routinely clear infections with the most common intestinal parasites of dogs. For indoor cats, yearly fecal exam with or without de-worming. For outdoor cats, we recommend biannual de-worming accompanied by fecal examination. That is why we often give a broad-spectrum dewormer as part of the routine annual visit for adult cats who go outside and have the possibility of hunting and eating mice. We have even had a few dog patients who have had persistent worm infections that we traced to their habit of hunting and eating mice.

Lactating bitches and cats: Bi-weekly de-worming until the puppies and kittens are weaned off.

In conclusion, regular detection and treatment of intestinal parasites is important for keeping pets healthy and in avoiding potential infection in children and pet owners.