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Intestinal Parasites in Dogs and Cats

Dogs and cats can be infected with many different intestinal parasites. Some of these can be transmitted to humans as well. Because there is not one medication that will eliminate all species of parasites, an accurate diagnosis is necessary to properly treat your pet.

Diagnosis is normally made by checking a fresh stool sample and looking for eggs with a microscope. In the case of tapeworms, you may see the segments (or egg packets) in the stool rather than finding the eggs under the microscope. Because these parasites can be detected and treated before symptoms begin, we recommend having a stool sample tested annually. Even indoor only cats should be tested yearly since the eggs may be brought in by bugs or on your shoes. Most puppies and kittens are born with intestinal worms and should be dewormed even if the stool sample is negative for eggs.

Occasionally, with a heavy parasite infection, multiple treatments may be needed.

Pets, especially dogs, may become reinfected since many of these eggs can live in the soil for long periods of time. This is why monthly heartworm preventatives such as Interceptor® are an important part of intestinal worm prevention and should be given all year.

Roundworms

Roundworms are the most common parasite of dogs and cats worldwide. Infection can occur in the uterus, through the milk while nursing, or ingestion of eggs. Eggs are normally passed in the stool starting 3 weeks after infection. Diagnosis is usually made by identifying the eggs, but in severe infections, animals may vomit the worms or pass them in the stool.

This parasite is treated by an oral medication given at two-week intervals. Interceptor® and Sentinel® (or Revolution® in cats) given monthly will help prevent infection with roundworms.

Although rare, this parasite may be passed to humans (especially children) and cause a serious disease called “visceral larva migrans”. Since almost all puppies and kittens are infected with this parasite, we deworm them starting as early as possible until they are 12 weeks old.

Hookworms

These common worms are bloodsuckers. Infection can occur in the uterus, through the milk while nursing, by ingestion of eggs or infective larva, or by skin penetration of infective larva. Eggs are normally passed in the stool within 2-3 weeks. Because these worms cause blood loss and anemia, they can be fatal especially in smaller animals. Diagnosis is made by identification of eggs. Treatment is an oral medication given at two-week intervals.

Severely anemic animals may need supportive care, iron supplements or even a blood transfusion. Interceptor® and Sentinel® (or Revolution® in cats) given monthly will help prevent infection.

Although uncommon, the larva can penetrate the skin of humans and cause skin lesions that may itch. In rare instances, this parasite may also cause “visceral larva migrans”.

Whipworms

This worm primarily affects dogs. Infection occurs by ingestion of eggs. Eggs are not passed in the stool for approximately 3 months and then are shed intermittently. Diagnosis is by identification of the eggs in the stool, but repeated samples may be needed. We may treat dogs with diarrhea even though we cannot find the eggs. Treatment is by an oral medication given over several days and repeated at 3 week and 3 month intervals. Because these eggs may survive in the soil for 4-5 years, monthly treatment with Interceptor® and Sentinel® for life is very important to prevent reinfection. There is no evidence of transmission to humans.

Tapeworms

Dogs and cats are most commonly infected by eating an infected flea, but rabbits and rodents may also transmit this parasite. Tapeworms cannot be passed directly from one dog or cat to another, but if fleas are present many or all pets may be infected. Tapeworms are diagnosed by finding the eggs or the egg packets (segments) in the stool or on the animal. The segments are initially white and may resemble rice, then become yellow as they dry and look more like sesame seeds. Because the segments dry out quickly and are too heavy to float, we may not find the individual eggs under the microscope. Treatment is a pill that may be repeated in 3 weeks. Monthly flea prevention such as Advantage®, Frontline®, Revolution®, or Sentinel® will prevent infection from fleas.

Coccidia

This parasite is not a worm but a protozoan or single celled parasite. Infection is by ingestion of infective spores called oocysts. Diagnosis is made by identification of oocysts in the stool. Treatment is by an oral medication given over several days. Transmission to humans is rare.

Giardia

This parasite is also a protozoan. Infection is by ingestion of the infected cysts, usually in contaminated water. Definite diagnosis is made by identification of the parasite or the cysts on a fresh stool sample. This parasite is very difficult to find and diagnosis may be made by response to treatment. Treatment is routinely an oral tablet given for several days. Some infections are resistant to this medication and we may need to use a powder mixed with food for several days. Transmission to humans may occur.