

UNDERSTANDING INTERNAL PARASITES

There is a lot of information and misinformation out there about dog and cat parasites. This handout goes over some of the Intestinal Worms

Worms are one of the things pet owners fear the most about their pet's health. Some of these fears are not without basis. We are at least fortunate in southern California that most worms are far less of a problem than in the more humid areas of the country. Still, we need to be careful about being too careless and not looking for and treating worms in our pet animals. One of the main reasons this is so, is some worms are zoonotic. That means WE can get them, too, and from our own pets!

□ Roundworms

There are lots of species of roundworms out there- seems most animals have one of their own. There are round worms of cats, dogs, horses etc. They are very common in dogs and cats and we just assume all puppies and kittens have roundworms when they are born. They get them from their mother while still in the womb, even if their mother has been treated for worms a few times herself (not always that easy to get rid of). They are not that hard to get rid of in puppies and kittens, but completely ridding a them of round worms is difficult to monitor, as a negative fecal exam does not necessarily mean there are no more worms inside. The CDC recently came out saying that only 20% of worms are diagnosed in fecal tests. So we miss 80% of all worm infections, even when we look for them!

Roundworms can infect us, too. The problem is we are not the 'normal' host for such worms, so if they get inside of us, they get 'lost' and can end up in some very serious places (eyes, brain etc.). This is called Visceral Larval Migrants and is a very serious condition. Children are most susceptible to this problem because they wash their hands the least and are most likely to handle your pet's feces.

If you see spaghetti-like white worms in your pet's stool most likely those are round worms. Clean your pet's stools up immediately and wash your hands well. Get worming medication soon and repeat it at least once. Bring a fecal in to help confirm the diagnosis.

□ Tapeworms

These are the second most common worms we encounter here in southern California. They are disgusting, but fortunately the more common species of tapeworms much less of a medical concern for both you and your pets. However, there are some extremely dangerous species of tapeworm animals can contract from eating raw meat, which is one of the reasons we strongly recommend NOT feed raw meat diets to pets. These rarer tapeworms are also very dangerous to us.

Fortunately these tapeworms are easy to get rid of and easy to prevent. Tape worms are 'flat worms' (as opposed to 'roundworms'), unrelated to the other internal parasitic worms we will discuss, and require different medications to get rid of them than what work on 'round worms'. There are very effective medications for them that are very safe for your pet. And there are now excellent flea medications which can prevent the fleas, too, so you can prevent your pet from getting the tapeworms.

□ Hookworms

Though a lot less commonly seen out here in California than in most other areas of the country, these are still important parasites to prevent and watch for. They are also a significant zoonotic parasite, able to infect humans by just mere contact (the larval stages can travel straight through the skin). These parasites are short, small 'round' worms but they can cause a lot of damage to the intestinal tract and lead to diarrhea, and even blood loss. Routine fecal exams usually detect this worm egg and routine de-worming can take care of them. But still it's a good idea to clean up your pet's stools regularly, and wash your hands very well after touching or playing with your puppy, even if fecal exams were negative and your pets de-wormed.

□ Whipworms

Though also uncommon in southern California, these 'round' worms are diagnosed fairly regularly on fecal exams. Getting rid of whipworms isn't always that easy and repeated fecal exams are often recommend to be sure you got them all. They are just resistant to many of the common worming medications used for the other two round worms

above, so sometimes additional deforming have to be performed to get rid of these. Like hookworms, these can cause a lot of damage to the intestinal tract and result in bleeding from there.

Common Protozoan Parasites Giardia

These are single celled motile (moving) organisms that can be found in standing water as well as in infected animals' stools. It is also allegedly a zoonotic species, infecting hundreds of thousands of people yearly causing all sorts of intestinal problems from diarrhea to cramping. The most common animal blamed for people infection is beavers, but in all likelihood the most common source of Giradia infections in people is dogs and other people. It is also a common infection in dogs (and somewhat in cats), especially in those that frequent the parks or live in rainy, moist climates. It is also not that easy to diagnose on routine fecal exams, though there are newer tests for this disease. There is even a vaccine available for it, though it's effectiveness is still unclear.

☐ Coccidia

This is another common microscopic organism usually found in puppies and kittens. It can cause bloody diarrhea, but sometimes it sits quietly and just infects other animals as they come in contact with the stools. This one is easy to pick up on fecal exams, and treatment is usually straight forward. It is, however, treated differently than the other parasites, so we can't routinely treat for it. That is why fecal exams are so important in puppies and kittens.

Common Blood Parasites

☐ Heartworms

These are fortunately fairly uncommon here in southern California. However, they are not unheard of so preventing against them isn't being ridiculous. Most owners elect not to put their pets on heartworm prevention, but we strongly recommend if your dog (rare in cats, at least here) goes outside the urban areas, to forests, marshes, lives outdoors at nights (when mosquitoes are out) or travels with you to other areas of the country, that you put your pet on the preventative. Heartworms are carried by mosquitoes and are ubiquitous in most other areas of the country (particularly the south). The worms mature once in the blood stream and eventually end up living in and near the heart. Larger numbers of these can cause significant heart disease and failure. Treatment is NOT so straight forward and carries risks of its own, so prevention is SO much better than the risk. The preventative is monthly, usually in a great tasting treat, and very safe for all breeds (even collies, which can react to higher doses of ivermectin, the product in Heartgard).

There are many other parasites that can be found in dogs and cats, but these area the common ones that are most likely to infect your pets, so we thought you should at least become familiar with these. If you have any questions about any of these, or other parasites, don't hesitate to ask us and we can tell you more, or direct you to where the information can be found.