

Ticks, Lice and Mites



Ticks are blood sucking insects which live on ground covered with bushes, shrubs or long grass from whence they can easily transfer to passing hosts, such as sheep, deer, cats and dogs.

At first sight, a tick may look rather like a small wart, but on closer inspection you will see the tiny legs surrounding the head parts which are buried in the skin. Once attached, the tick will grow larger and darker as it sucks the blood of its host animal, and when full, it will drop off onto the ground. The host is often unaware of their presence, but a tick infestation is potentially dangerous for two reasons:

1. repeated attacks can lead to anaemia
2. ticks can transmit blood-borne diseases such as tick pyaemia and Lyme disease.

If you are considering taking your pet abroad, you may also encounter other tick-related diseases – see our Foreign Travel leaflet for more details.

It is advisable to protect your pet by means of regular treatment, available from Heathfield Vets. If you see a tick on your pet, never attempt to remove it by pulling at its body as it is very easy to leave the head parts buried in the skin, which can cause abscesses.

Instead, first kill the tick by applying a flea spray, either directly or via a piece of cotton wool if near the eyes. It will take some time, but as the tick dies, it will withdraw the mouth parts and drop off. Alternatively, use a plastic tick remover, available from the surgery.

Lice

Lice appear flattened from top to bottom - rather than side to side, as is the flea. There are two types:

The sucking louse, which has mouth parts adapted for sucking the blood of its host, and heavy infestation can therefore lead to anaemia, as well as constant irritation.

Biting lice, which feed on skin scale and hair debris on the surface of the host. They are more active than sucking lice, and so cause more irritation, leading to dermatitis and hair loss.

All lice are host-specific and spend their entire life cycle on their chosen host species. Being unable to survive more than a few days off the host, and unable to jump, they are spread only by close contact or by the use of contaminated brushes and combs.

Because of this restricted life cycle and inability to survive in the general environment, a louse infestation is easy to eradicate.

The female louse lays eggs (often known as nits), which are cemented to the hairs of the host and take 14 to 21 days to develop into adults. Therefore treatment must be continued for at least this long, as the eggs are very resistant, whereas the emerging immature louse can be easily destroyed. Remember to treat the area of your pet's bed with an environmental insecticide at the same time.

Mites

There are many different types of mite, each with its own preferred host, although some will occasionally attack other hosts. Most spend their entire life cycle on the host, being unable to survive more than a few days in the environment. Mange is the general term given to skin disease caused by several different types of mites, but a specific diagnosis is often difficult, requiring multiple skin scrapings as some mites hide in the deeper layers of the skin.

Treatment will vary according to the type of mite present, and may have to be continued for prolonged periods.

In this area we commonly see sarcoptic or fox mange, which causes severe and constant irritation.

Apart from those causing mange, three other types of mites are easily recognisable.

Ear mites are very small and rarely seen. They live within the ear canals of the cat or dog, causing intense irritation and scratching. Dogs seem to have a lower tolerance than cats, therefore any cats living in close contact with an infested dog should also be carefully examined.

Loose, crumbly, dark brown wax will be present; instantly recognisable and always indicating an ear mite infestation. The ears must be thoroughly cleaned of wax before treatment so that the medication can penetrate thoroughly. Treatment should be maintained for at least three weeks to ensure that all stages of the life cycle are killed. Occasionally, ear mites can cause irritation and hair loss at other sites such as around the eyes. In this case, systemic insecticide treatment will be needed in addition to ear drops. Alternatively, both situations can be treated by using one of the spot-on anti-parasite preparations available at the practice.

