Worm Control in cats and dogs

Heathfield VETS

Cats and dogs, as predatory and naturally inquisitive animals, can pick up all kinds of parasites on their travels. For the sake of human as well as pet health, these parasites should be controlled by regular use of worming products, available from the surgery.

Roundworms can affect dogs and cats of any age and may not be noticed by you, as mild infestations do not always have any obvious signs. Roundworm eggs, which are shed in the host's faeces, are microscopic and can only be detected by laboratory examination. They can remain dormant in the environment until a suitable host licks and swallows an egg, thus re-activating it to continue its life cycle.

Humans may accidentally ingest roundworm eggs. Crawling babies and toddlers are most at risk as they tend to put dirty fingers and toys into their mouths and are likely to allow a pet to lick their face. Occasionally, the minute larvae which emerge from the hatched eggs can burrow out of the intestine into the body. In such cases, the migrating larvae can produce unpleasant symptoms including stomach upsets, headaches, sore throats and listlessness. If the larvae reach a vulnerable area such as the eye, sight problems can result, though fortunately, cases of permanent blindness are very rare. This condition has led to considerable publicity, thus rightly stressing the importance of roundworm control. Infection in humans has also been linked to ADD and ADHD (attention deficit disorders) and asthma.

Toxocara canis, the common roundworm of dogs, normally follows a simple life cycle. Worm eggs ingested by the host hatch in the small intestine, grow through several larval stages to adulthood and eventually shed their own eggs in the host's faeces. In addition, some larvae may migrate out of the intestine into other body tissues and become dormant.

In un-neutered bitches the changing hormone levels associated with pregnancy or false pregnancy can activate these dormant larvae so that they resume travelling through the host.

Larvae may travel to the uterus, infecting any developing pups, as well as to the mammary glands, shedding eggs into the milk and causing further infection as soon as the pups begin to suckle. Eggs shed in the pups' faeces are then re-ingested by the bitch as she cleans them.

If young pups are heavily infested at birth, they may die within a few days. Older pups are often pot-bellied, suffering with diarrhoea and failure to grow.

Surveys show that infection of pups can be reduced by up to 98% by dosing the bitch from day 40 of pregnancy until two days after whelping.

Toxocara felis, although also a potential human hazard, is much less of a risk as it does not cause pre-natal infection of kittens.

We recommend the use of an effective roundworm treatment for puppies and kittens from the age of two weeks. Bitches and queens should be wormed at the same time as their offspring until the time of weaning.

Tapeworms are more of a problem in the adult cat or dog. There are several species, each using the cat or dog as a primary host. The head of the worm is buried in the wall of the host's intestine and the body is formed of a long line of connected segments. The ripe segments at the tail end contain hundreds of eggs and these egg packets are shed in the host's faeces. They are often seen sticking to the fur around the hind end of a cat or dog, looking rather like grains of rice.

Eggs are then released into the environment and can infect a secondary host. Depending on the species of tapeworm this could be a farm animal (cow, sheep, pig etc.) a wild animal (rabbit, rat, bird etc.) or an insect (flea or louse). When eaten by the appropriate secondary host, the egg hatches into a larva that forms a cyst in the host's muscle tissue. If the secondary host is then eaten by a primary host (cat or dog), the life cycle is completed.

Hunting cats are most at risk from the tapeworm that uses small mammals and birds as its secondary host, as are dogs who regularly hunt and eat rats and rabbits or who scavenge carcases (sheep or deer).

Both cats and dogs are frequently infected with the tapeworm transmitted via the flea, and therefore treatment will only be effective when combined with flea control.

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