

Parasites (Worms, fleas, ticks, and other nasty critters)

The snow is melted, the grass is coming up, and birds are singing in the air. Spring is here! Spring is finally here!

We are all excited to dust off our patio chairs, plant flowers, and start spring cleaning. Unfortunately we aren't the only ones to be excited about the change in seasons. Parasites also take advantage of the warm beautiful weather.

Parasites can be divided into two broad categories – internal and external.

Internal parasites are what we commonly refer to as worms and include a variety of roundworms, hookworms, whipworms, tapeworms, and flukes. Most internal parasites live in the body – often in the intestinal tract (although some like to migrate to liver, lungs, and kidneys). Adult worms live in the intestines and release huge numbers of eggs that are then passed to the outside in the feces. These eggs are so small that we can't see them – but they will stick to leaves, grass, and concrete long after all visible feces have been washed away.

Parasite eggs survive the winter and in the spring (and summer and fall) just sit around waiting for somebody to eat the grass or lick their feet. Once the eggs are swallowed they hatch into larvae that attach to the walls of the intestinal tract and mature into adults. Some adults can live for years before dying, releasing millions of eggs in the meantime. Only when the worm is sick and dying does it pass into the feces. That is why we can never say our dog/cat/horse does not have worms because we don't see it in the feces.

My pet looks fat and happy. Who cares if it has a few worms? Actually, while a huge number of worms cause nutritional problems, leading to skinny pot bellied unhealthy looking animals, small numbers can be problematic as well. Our body recognizes if there are parasites and the immune system begins to fight back – even a small amount of worms can be a strain on the immune system. If parasites migrate through internal organs they can cause damage that may not become obvious until much later. Finally, but still importantly, parasites can infect people (particularly children) and cause rare but serious problems. One example is the roundworm (known as *toxocara canis*). This is a common parasite in our dogs, however if it infects a child it can migrate through the eye or brain and cause serious health problems. Another zoonotic parasite (zoonotic means an animal disease that can affect people) is the hookworm. The hookworm egg can be absorbed through the skin and cause 'creeping eruptions' in people. (This is why dogs are not allowed on many beaches).

How can I tell if my pet has worms? There is a simple test called a fecal. We take a sample of feces and analyze it for worm eggs. This gives us an idea of how many worms are present.

How often should I deworm my pet? We recommend regular deworm for all pets – this is particularly important for young pets and pets that are around children. Your veterinarian can design a deworming program that is right for you and your pet.

External parasites include fleas, ticks, and lice. These are easier to spot than internal parasites! However, the eggs are still too small to be seen. Fleas are transferred directly from animal to animal or through infected bedding or environments. Fleas cannot live a long time without feeding, but their eggs can survive for quite a while. This is why dogs with fleas are treated several times to make sure that no fleas remain. Ticks larvae sit in bushes or tall grasses and wait until your pet brushes up against it before transferring to the pet.

External parasites can cause problems as well as internal parasites. Firstly, some of them (such as fleas or lice) cause severe itching and can cause allergic skin problems. Ticks can carry nasty diseases such as Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever and Ehrlichia.

External parasites can be treated and prevented with topical treatments. Any pet who has fleas or lice, or is exposed to animals that may have fleas or lice, as well as dogs that spend time in the outdoors and are at risk for ticks should be treated with a topical paraciticide. Please consult your veterinary clinic for the appropriate treatment and prevention plans.

Don't let parasites ruin your spring! Consult with your veterinarian to develop a deworming and external parasite control program that lets everybody (except the parasites) enjoy the beautiful weather!