Pets, Parasites and People

It is common for a dog or cat to become infected with an internal or external parasite at some point in their life. Parasites can affect your pet in a variety of ways, ranging from simple irritation to life-threatening conditions if left untreated. Some parasites are also zoonotic, which means they can be transmitted from animals to humans.

Who is at risk? Any person in contact with an infected animal or disease vector (a disease carrier that spreads the disease from an infected animal to an uninfected human) is considered at risk. Individuals with compromised or immature immune systems or those with poor hygiene are generally at higher risk, such as infants and small children, pregnant women, and the elderly.

What can I do to reduce the risk of parasites for my family and pets?

1. Practice good personal hygiene.
2. Clean up pet feces regularly.
3. Use an effective flea and tick preventative year-round.
4. Use an effective internal parasite preventative administered monthly year-round.
5. Visit your veterinarian for annual testing and physical examination.

What kind of internal parasites or worms can infect my cat or dog?

Intestinal Worms: There are a number of intestinal worms that can infect dogs and cats, and they vary according to the species. These include roundworms, hookworms, whipworms and tapeworms, and they are very prolific. Roundworms are the most common intestinal parasite of pets and the most likely to be transmitted to humans. Humans can accidentally ingest infective worm eggs that have been passed through the pet's feces and left in the environment. The eggs can then hatch in the human intestinal tract, and the immature worms can travel to various tissues in the body, including the eyes and brain, potentially causing serious infections.

Giardia: Giardia is another common internal parasite which can infect humans, dogs, and cats. Your dog or cat might get infected by:

- Being in contact with infected feces from another dog or cat
- Rolling and playing in contaminated soil
- Licking its body after contact with a contaminated surface (for example, a dirty litter box or dog cage or crate)
- Drinking water from a contaminated creek, pond, or other body of water

Young pets, like puppies and kittens, have a higher risk of illness than adult dogs and cats. Common signs and symptoms of giardia infection (in both humans and pets) are diarrhea, gas, abdominal discomfort, nausea, and vomiting. However, it is possible to be infected and have no signs or symptoms of illness.

Heartworm: Heartworms can be a very serious problem for both dogs and cats, especially those in mosquito-infested areas, as mosquitoes are a vector and intermediate host for the pest. Heartworms can kill or seriously debilitate pets that are infected with them. Heartworms live in the bloodstream, lungs and heart of infected pets. A year-round preventive program is most effective to keep pets free of heartworms.

Do fleas and ticks on my pet present a health risk to my family?
Yes. Fleas and ticks can carry and either directly or indirectly transmit several potential illnesses of humans. For example, rickettsiosis can be transmitted directly by ticks. Bartonellosis is transmitted between cats through fleas and then may spread to people. Also, fleas serve as an intermediate host for tapeworms, which can infect both pets and humans. A year-round preventive program is most effective to keep pets free of fleas and ticks.
Additional Resources: www.petsandparasites.org

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