

Creepy Crawlers! Parasites and Your Pet By: Dr. Kaia Scheel

A big part of keeping our pets and ourselves, as humans living with pets, healthy is the prevention and treatment of parasites. We tailor our parasite plans to each pet based on their lifestyle, environment, and the health concerns of the pet as well as the humans in the household.

Many of the parasites we have here in Colorado are not only harmful to our pets but can also be transmitted to humans. These parasites are called **zoonotic**. Parasites of cats and dogs come in many forms. Here we will discuss a few of the most common parasites found in our part of the country.

Roundworms – These are very common and **zoonotic** (usually infect children and can cause variety of problems including blindness). They usually live in the digestive tract of their host, but the larvae can migrate through the body and cause eye and neurological disease. Roundworms are initially passed to puppies and kittens while in the womb and during nursing. The microscopic eggs are then passed in the stool where they can infect other animals and humans. Animals can also get roundworms from eating rodents. The infective eggs last several months in the environment and can even survive harsh conditions. There are often no obvious clinical signs of an infection. Patients are diagnosed with roundworms with a microscopic examination of the feces/stool. When there are symptoms in pets, they include poor weight gain, skin /coat problems, diarrhea, and pot bellied appearance. Roundworms are easily treated with a variety of prescription medications. All kittens and puppies should receive several doses of medication starting at 2 weeks of age in puppies and 6 weeks of age in kittens. Dogs and cats should be treated monthly thereafter. Most heartworm preventatives also treat for roundworms.

Tapeworms – These are very common and can be **zoonotic**. Pets can get tapeworms from eating raw meat, rodents, rabbits, or from eating fleas (while the pet is grooming him/herself). The symptoms of infection can be poor hair coat, weight loss, anal itching, intestinal distress, diarrhea, vomiting, or there can be no overt signs. Adult segments of tapeworms are about the size of a grain of rice and they can be sometimes seen on the skin/fur near the anus or on the stool. Tapeworms are easily treated with medication and animals that are at risk or have had them before should be regularly given deworming medication. This is usually a separate dewormer from that used for heartworm and roundworms.

Heartworms – These potentially fatal parasites are transmitted by mosquitoes. They can infect dogs and cats, but not humans. The adult heartworm lives in the heart and vessels of the lungs and causes serious disease. Treatment is costly and many animals suffer significant complications, including death, even with treatment. Luckily, heartworms are preventable with monthly medication. In the Fort Collins area, our climate has become mild enough that we are now seeing mosquitoes year round most winters and therefore recommend year round protection against heartworm.

Fleas - Unfortunately, due likely to our milder winters and more moisture, we are seeing more fleas. Fleas feed on the blood of their host and can bite dogs, cats, or people. Usually pets are exposed from either entering wild animal environments (foxes, coyotes, prairie dogs) or coming in contact with other dogs or cats with fleas. Fleas themselves can cause significant disease and discomfort for pets as well as serving as vectors spreading other diseases. Fleas can spread tapeworms and even plague, both of which are **zoonotic**. Plague, which does exist in our area, can be fatal to both pets and humans. Plague is usually spread from prairie dogs to cats to humans. If your cat has access to a prairie dog town, please be sure to talk with us about prevention and symptoms of this disease. There are several products out there to prevent and treat fleas. Prevention is key as once fleas are introduced into your house, decontamination of the house can be challenging.