

I realize that a discussion of intestinal parasites is not what most people had in mind for their Sunday morning. But for those of you who live closely with your animal family members it's a subject we should review from time to time.

The understanding and control of intestinal parasites in animals has obvious benefits for our pets. After all, intestinal worms can adversely affect a pet's health in many ways. But few people realize that parasite control in pets has as much to do with human health as it does with animal health. Pets can share many of their parasitic infections with people, especially children. The bottom line is that our effort to control animal parasites has broad ranging benefits for both animals and humans.

The Companion Animal Parasite Council (CAPC) is an independent council of veterinarians, parasitologists, physicians, and others that works to create guidelines for better control of parasites that threaten both animal and human health.

CAPC and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have published some interesting, if not worrisome, statistics about parasite infections in pets and people.

To quote from the CAPC website:

“The public's exposure to zoonotic parasites is of a magnitude generally not recognized by veterinarians, physicians, or members of the public. 3-6 million people in the United States are infected with roundworm larva each year.”

According to CAPC, 34% of all dogs nationwide are infected with gastrointestinal parasites (54% in southeastern states), while other studies have shown that virtually all puppies are infected with roundworms. And possibly most alarming is the growing concern about the roundworm species that infects raccoons. This parasite, should it infect people, can be particularly aggressive causing blindness and nervous system disease. The raccoon roundworm parasite is found in raccoons across the U.S. with the highest prevalence in the Midwest, Northeast and along the West Coast.

Most human infections of these parasites occur through the ingestion of microscopic eggs passed in the stool of infected pets or wildlife. Animal parasites that infect people usually don't mature to adult worms; rather they remain in their larval stage which can migrate through various tissues of the body including the gut wall, skin, eye, and even the brain. This “larval migration” process is what is so dangerous about these infections.

The following are some steps you and your veterinarian can take to reduce the risk of parasite infection in your pets and the rest of your family:

- 1) Regular pet deworming programs (CAPC recommends lifetime, year round prevention with monthly medications effective against gastrointestinal parasites as well as heartworm.
- 2) Pet fecal examinations run by your veterinarian's lab at least one to two times per year, followed by appropriate treatment as needed.
- 3) Daily disposal of canine and feline feces and compliance with all “pooper scooper” laws.
- 4) Covering children's sand boxes when not in use.

- 5) Preventing predatory behavior (e.g., keeping cats indoors)
- 6) Feeding cooked, canned or dry pet food.
- 7) Avoid feeding/attracting wildlife.
- 8) Washing or cooking home grown vegetables for human consumption
- 9) Adequate hand washing after contact with anything contaminated with dog or cat feces.

CAPC recommends pet owners visit www.petsandparasites.org to find out more about how they can protect their entire family-both human and animal.

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