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Promoting Parasite Prevention: A Veterinary Guide

Veterinary professionals understand the importance of parasite detection and prevention, but clients may need education from the veterinary team to understand the threat that parasites play in their pets. To help the veterinary team feel more confident discussing parasites with pet owners, this handout offers answers to common questions and key talking points for pet owner discussions.

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Screening for Parasites

Many pet owners are surprised when they find out their pet has parasites, especially when pets are asymptomatic or have mild signs that go unnoticed. Using the following talking points may help owners better understand why routine tests to detect parasites and associated diseases are crucial:

- **Many parasites are excellent at hiding.** Ectoparasites are often buried in the fur, making them difficult to see. Intestinal parasites may only shed eggs or cysts in the feces, which are not visible to the naked eye, making screening measures an important part of routine veterinary care.
- **Some pets are more prone to parasitic infection.** Juvenile pets are more vulnerable to intestinal parasites than adult pets and should be screened for parasites at least 4 times in the first year of life, according to the Companion Animal Parasite Council.^{1,2}
- **Many parasites are contagious.** This means they could be passed on to other pets in the household or lead to a cycle of reinfection.
- **Some parasites are zoonotic (transmissible to humans).** Organisms like *Giardia* spp and certain helminths (parasitic worms) can infect humans, with small children and immunocompromised people being the most vulnerable.

Why Is Prevention Important?

Year-round, broad-spectrum control against intestinal parasites, heartworms, and fleas is recommended for all dogs and cats, with tick prevention advised based on risk assessment.^{1,3} Despite this, pet owners may still not have their pet on parasite prevention for a variety of reasons ranging from cost or misunderstanding of how their pet can be infected. The following talking points may aid the veterinary team in getting pet owners to understand the importance of prevention:

- **Parasites can cause harm and discomfort.** Some parasitic infections are not obvious

to owners until clinical signs emerge. At this point, pets may experience pain, decreased quality of life, and/or permanent health changes before treatment can be initiated.

- **Parasites can be difficult to treat.** Despite many parasites having reliable treatment options, diseases such as those caused by heartworms and ticks can cause permanent damage or irreversible disease.
- **It reduces the chance of zoonosis.** Regular parasite control decreases environmental contamination, thereby reducing transmission and potential zoonotic exposure.

Common Pet Parasites

The following can serve as a guide to help pet owners better understand the fight against parasites.

Fleas

- *What are they?* Tiny, flightless, blood-sucking insects that multiply rapidly and can lead to anemia, hair loss, skin irritation, and even tapeworm infections.
- *How are they spread?* Fleas jump from host to host. Most pets pick up fleas from another pet or animal, including wildlife from the yard.
- *Are they zoonotic?* Technically, yes. They can bite people but prefer to live on pets or other animals.
- *How are they detected?* A veterinary team member can check pets for fleas by closely examining the skin, particularly near the tail base and dorsal hind end areas, although fleas can be found anywhere on the body. A flea comb can be used to search for live fleas or flea “dirt” (ie, excrement). However, fleas are difficult to detect unless present in large numbers.
- *Are they preventable?* Yes, with a variety of topical or oral preventive products.

Ticks

- *What are they?* Parasitic, blood-sucking arachnids that can transmit potentially life-threatening diseases.
- *How are they spread?* A tick attaches to a host.
- *Are they zoonotic?* Yes. Ticks can attach to humans and carry zoonotic diseases.
- *How are they detected?* Ticks can attach anywhere on the body but are commonly found on the face and extremities. Team members can teach owners how to properly remove a tick from their pet. Tickborne disease testing is recommended annually.¹
- *Are they preventable?* Yes, with a variety of topical or oral preventive products.

Heartworms

- *What are they?* Heartworms are a type of parasitic worm

(helminth) that mature inside the blood vessels near the heart and lungs, causing severe disease if left untreated.

- *How are they spread?* A mosquito vector carries the heartworm larvae and infects the host with a bite.
- *Are they zoonotic?* No. Humans cannot be infected.
- *How are they detected?* An in-clinic blood test is an easy and reliable way of screening for heartworm disease. Dogs should be screened annually. In addition, pets may be tested for heartworms if they show signs of heart or lung disease.
- *Are they preventable?* Yes, with a variety of preventives.

Intestinal Parasites

- *What are they?* The most common consist of *helminths* (roundworms, tapeworms, hookworms, whipworms) and *protozoa* (*Giardia* spp) that are ingested from the environment and live in a pet’s GI tract. They often cause no clinical signs but may cause GI illness or anemia if left untreated.
- *How are they spread?* Spread through the fecal–oral route or contaminated water is most common, although tapeworms can be spread through ingestion of fleas.
- *Are they zoonotic?* Some have the potential to be zoonotic and spread through the fecal–oral route. This is chiefly a concern in families with small children.
- *How are they detected?* Fecal examination by centrifugation or PCR or antigen tests. It is also possible to visualize adult worms in feces, but this is not a reliable method of detection.
- *Are they preventable?* Yes, with a variety of preventives.

Detection and prevention of parasites is an important part of veterinary medical care. Ensuring pet owners understand the value of both detection and prevention is key to winning the parasite fight.

References

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2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. What every pet owner should know about roundworms and hookworms. CDC website. https://www.cdc.gov/parasites/resources/web/roundworms_hookworms.html. Updated January 25, 2021. Accessed May 26, 2023.
3. American Animal Hospital Association–American Veterinary Medical Association Preventive Healthcare Guidelines Task Force. Development of new canine and feline preventive healthcare guidelines designed to improve pet health. *J Am Anim Hosp Assoc*. 2011;47(5):306-11.