

Pet care

by Peter Segall, DVM

Spring has sprung—parasites are back

Springtime is when parasites become a problem for my four-footed patients. The focus of this article will be on the lifecycles, prevention and treatment of the parasites that commonly plague household pets. Foremost among these are heartworms, fleas and ticks. While these can afflict pets all year long, warm weather in the Northeast brings them to the forefront.

Heartworm disease is seen mostly in dogs, but occasionally will be seen in cats. I've had clients tell me they don't need to worry about their dogs because they are mostly indoors. Dogs that are walked can be bitten by mosquitoes. Even hairy dogs can be bitten in the nasal area. The way heartworms spread is through by mosquitos. A mosquito sucks blood from a heartworm positive dog and bites your dog. The bite may transmit a baby heartworms, microfilaria, which burrow through tissues and eventually winds up in the heart. This process takes up to 6 months. Once in the heart, the worms mate and produce new microfilaria which can then be transmitted by a mosquito to another dog.

The worms in the heart do their damage by plugging up the vessels from the heart to the lungs, depriving the lungs of blood, essentially killing the lungs. All veterinarians provide medications to prevent heartworms from maturing into the heart. It is very important to keep your dog on medication all year—or at least three months past mosquito season.

As soon as outdoor temperatures reached 45 degrees, ticks have been coming out of hiding with a vengeance. These ticks transmit diseases such as Lyme, erlichiosis and Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever. Ticks feed on mice, deer and other mammals and may ingest disease-causing organisms. The next time they feed they may transmit these organisms into the next host, be it a dog or a human being. Ticks usually need to be attached for 24 hours to transmit the pathogen. Most often, there is no pain, so ticks are not scratched off. Short grass usually doesn't harbor ticks, but brush, fields and forest environments, including edges of trails provide a suitable place for ticks to live. It is a good idea to check your dog carefully upon returning from these areas. Ticks are attracted to carbon dioxide in exhaled breath and are found near the face and neck. Preventic collars and monthly applications of insecticides such as Frontline,

Revolution and Interceptor will prevent 95-100 % of tick infestations.

Fleas are not around in very large numbers at this time of year. An animal with fleas this month probably had them all winter or lives in an infested space. Indoors, fleas lay eggs, which hatch pupae that morphs into nymphs and eventually into adult fleas.

This cycle can last up to a year and the pupal stage is impossible to kill. What does one do in a flea-infested house? Professional exterminators will do a very thorough job, which is usually guaranteed. If you choose to do it yourself, sprays with insect growth regulators added to kill eggs are the way to go. They can be in foggers, which you must place in each room or in sprays which you must apply all over and under furniture. We now have wonderful, safe and effective medications for treating fleas on the animal itself. The best I have found is called Frontline. It is a spot-on placed monthly between the shoulder blades and will kill fleas and ticks for a full month.

I just remembered to put Annie's Frontline on after pulling 9 ticks from her head. She was so good, letting me pull them out without moving. Annie spent the weekend running in the fields and expertly catching Frisbee. We need an Australian Shepard Frisbee catching contest. If you know of one, please let me know. Oliver stole a sprig of grapes decorating the holiday table and disappeared with them. Someday we'll find a mess of moldy grapes under something.

Enjoy the warm weather.

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