

Parasites, Pets, and Kids

Authored by: Tiffany J. Rule, DVM



Know the facts: Don't expose your children!

- Hookworms and roundworms can be harbored by your dog or cat and transmitted to children who are living in homes with pets. In some cases these parasites can cause blindness in humans. It is thought that 30% to 50% of dogs and cats carry gastrointestinal (GI) parasites and that 1 to 3 million people in the U.S. have infections from the same parasites carried by pets. Children, the elderly and immunocompromised people are at high risk.
- Dogs get infected with hookworms and roundworms by walking places where other dogs have defecated. The microscopic roundworm eggs and hookworm larvae end up on your dog's feet. Your dog then licks his feet and infects him or herself with these GI parasites. Three weeks later, your dog is shedding hookworm eggs and larvae from his GI tract. If your dog licks his anus and then licks your child, or if your child pets your dog, he or she can become infected with these parasites.
- Dogs can get ticks that spread Lyme disease, anaplasmosis, Rocky Mountain spotted fever, ehrlichiosis, and tularemia, which can affect people if the ticks detach from the dog and attach themselves to your child. This could be a risk factor for your children if the family dog or cat sleeps in their bed.
- Cats get infected with hookworms and tapeworms by hunting prey. Even if your cat lives indoors, the ingestion of one house mouse can expose your cat to GI parasites. Cats with a flea infestation can spread cat scratch fever to children, elderly people, or immunocompromised (AIDS, cancer patients, organ transplant recipients) people.

How Can You Prevent the Risk of Spreading Parasites to Your Children?

- Keep your dog on monthly heartworm preventative all year. This medication helps to prevent hookworms and roundworms in your dog. Keep your dog on topical flea and tick control all year.
- Scoop the yard where your dog defecates at least weekly, ideally daily, as worm eggs and larvae are found in stool and can contaminate the environment.
- Bring your pet's stool sample to your veterinarian at least twice per year and ideally four times per year. You do not have to bring your pet into the veterinary hospital for this service. The stool should be fresh. Many veterinarians will provide a special cup that allows specimen collection without touching the stool.
- Keep your cat on heartworm prevention once per month all year. This medication eliminates hookworms that could be potentially spread to humans in the household. It also kills fleas, which can be culprits in spreading cat scratch disease (cat scratch fever).
- Teach your children to wash their hands before eating, especially if they have recently handled their pet.

Date Published: 3/10/2005 11:05:00 AM

Date Reviewed/Revised: 05/15/2007