Common Internal Parasites of Cats

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Many kinds of internal parasites are common in cats. Most do not cause serious disease unless the animal is heavily infested. However, parasites are likely to cause illness in young kittens and puppies. The first indication of parasitic disease in a pet often is diarrhea or vomiting. The animal may be a little lethargic and not too interested in its food. Its haircoat may be dull. If parasites are suspected, a fresh stool sample should be taken to the veterinarian for diagnosis. He then can prescribe the proper deworming medication, eliminating the problem.

"Outdoor cats are more prone to becoming infected with parasites, because they hunt and because they are more likely to come into contact with other cats and their droppings," said Dr. C. E. Kirkpatrick, assistant professor of parasitology at the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine. "House cats, unless they are infected when they arrive in a household or have come into contact with an intermediate host, don't have internal parasites that frequently.

The most common internal parasites seen in cats is roundworm. "There are two kinds of roundworm affecting cats," said Dr. Kirkpatrick. "Toxocara cati, which affects cats only, and Toxascaris leonina, which affects cats and dogs." Kittens become infected with Toxocara shortly after birth because the larvae of Toxocara cati migrate to the milk during lactation. Toxascaris leonina larvae do not leave the intestines to migrate to other tissues. Infection with this worm occurs by contact with feces or by eating infected prey, such as mice. Roundworm infestation can be debilitating for kittens. Toxascaris leonina is another intestinal parasite seen occasionally in cats. Larvae of these worms survive for long periods of time on the ground where the cat can come into contact with them. It is thought that threadworm (Strongyloides) may be transmitted through the milk of an affected queen. Although it seldom causes disease in cats, Strongyloides is capable of infecting humans.

Cats are also subject to lungworms which can cause respiratory illness. Capillaria aerophila, a hair-like worm, lives in the bronchi. Eggs are laid in the air passages, coughed up and ingested. The eggs stay, then pass out to the environment in the feces. A larva then develops within each egg, which is infective for another cat when ingested. Cats with this parasite can develop chronic respiratory disease, though many infected cats show no signs of disease.

Asthmostrongylus is another lungworm found in cats. It is not as common in this area, but it is seen occasionally. Lungworms can cause serious problems for kittens because of the respiratory disease which can develop. Cats become infective with lungworms by eating snails or slugs. Intermediate hosts of these worms, or prey animals which have consumed infected, intermediate hosts.

Worms are not the only parasites affecting cats. Single-celled organisms, protozoa, may also cause intestinal signs. Isospora spp. ("coccidia") rarely cause problems in older cats. However, protozoa can cause respiratory illness. Giardia is another intestinal parasite seen occasionally in cats. Larvae of these worms survive for long periods of time on the ground where the cat can come into contact with them. It is thought that threadworm (Strongyloides) may be transmitted through the milk of an affected queen. Although it seldom causes disease in cats, Strongyloides is capable of infecting humans.

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Giardia cysts.

Tapeworm is another parasite affecting cats. "There are five kinds," said Dr. Kirkpatrick. "When the tapeworm is diagnosed, it is important to determine which one it is, as the species are transmitted in different ways. And to prevent reinfection, environmental controls should be instituted."

The most common tapeworm in cats is Dipylidium caninum, which is also seen in dogs. It is transmitted by ingestion of fleas. The parasite is not transmitted by fleas. If the cat has Dipylidium caninum then it and the environment must be treated for fleas to prevent reinfection. Other types of tapeworm infection occur if the cat eats rodents, snakes and frogs.

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Toxoplasma gondii can start an infection as the organism multiplies within a host.

Diagnosis of these parasitic diseases is made by microscopic examination of fecal material. "It is important that an owner bring a fresh stool sample when the cat is taken for its annual check-up," said Dr. Kirkpatrick. "This is part of the exam. Also when acquiring a new kitten, it should be checked for parasites even though it may already have been dewormed."

He recommended that cats which live indoors exclusively be checked annually for parasites. Outdoor cats need to be checked at least twice a year. He also recommended against routine deworming. "For a drug to be effective, it has to be the correct one," he said. "Many deworming drugs work only for a particular parasite, some only on one stage of the life cycle. In order to utilize the most effective drug, the sample has to be checked by the veterinarian to determine which drug is needed to control the parasite. Often multiple dewormings are needed to eliminate the organism. It is best to consult the veterinarian before deworming an animal, particularly young kittens."

Giardia.

Internal parasites can be prevented through proper sanitation. Litter pans should be cleaned and disinfected frequently. Cats should not be permitted to eat prey or raw meat. Also they should be checked and treated for fleas on a regular basis. "In most cases, parasites cause only mild problems," said Dr. Kirkpatrick. "But they may interfere with the absorption of nutrients and this can be detrimental, particularly to kittens or old animals. As cats mature, they develop some immunity to parasites, making it much more difficult for the organisms to cause serious disease."

Dr. Kirkpatrick is conducting a study with Dr. Lawrence Glickman, Chief, Section of Epidemiology, to determine the species of parasites found in pets in this area. He hopes to determine how common parasite infections are among cats and dogs and whether certain species are more prevalent than others. The researchers are also looking at the geographic areas where the parasites are found, and they hope to determine whether certain parasites are more prevalent in specific geographic areas.