

Zoonotic Skin Parasites: Ringworm

Humans have enjoyed the companionship of their four-footed friends for centuries. Pets bring unconditional love, but they can sometimes be accompanied by a zoonotic parasite. A number of scientific studies have found that direct contact with pets can put people at risk for the transmission of zoonotic parasites.

What is a zoonotic parasite?

A parasite is an animal that lives upon or within another living organism at whose expense it obtains nutrients and shelter. Zoonotic parasites can be transmitted from pets to humans.

RINGWORM

Ringworm is a zoonotic disease and is not actually a worm, but a fungus found in the soil that can infect the skin. Ringworm is most commonly recognized in cats (often kittens), although dogs, rabbits and rodents can also become infected.

Who in the family is at risk for ringworm?

All family members who handle an infected animal are at risk. People who spend time cuddling and sleeping with infected pets are more commonly infected. Children run a higher risk of coming in contact with a zoonotic disease due to their play habits and attraction to pets. Some people may be more susceptible than others to ringworm infection.

How is ringworm transmitted?

Ringworm is spread by direct contact with an infected animal by fungal spores in their hair or scales. Cats and kittens can spread the infection on themselves or between cats through grooming.

How do I know if my pet or I are infected with ringworm?

In animals, ringworm often appears as a crusty or scaly patch on the skin, and is sometimes accompanied with alopecia (hair loss). In people, the infection may appear on the skin as a ring with reddish borders (often on the face and hands). The infected areas may or may not itch and often have flakey edges. Infection can also appear on people's scalp, beginning as a small raised area (papule). The hair then becomes brittle and the area increases in size, resulting in scaly, bald patches.

How is ringworm treated?

Ringworm requires medical attention. In pets, treatment may include bathing with a special shampoo and applications of topical antifungal ointment to the affected area. For infections non-responsive to bathing and topicals, or in case of widespread infection, oral medications may be needed. Humans usually respond to topical antifungal ointments, but should seek the advice of their family physician.

What can you do to protect the entire family from ringworm?

Be aware of who your pets play with and discourage or prevent contact with ringworm-infected pets. In people, practice good hygiene for both your family and pet. Encourage family members to wash exposed areas of skin after petting and playing with pets. Seek medical attention from your veterinarian if you notice your pet is chewing at her skin or itching or you see any unusual hair loss or skin concerns.



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