

Tapeworms

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.

What are tapeworms?

Tapeworms are long and flat (sometimes several feet), made up of many segments and live in the small intestine of dogs, cats, domestic animals and wildlife. Tapeworms do not have a mouth, and instead hold onto the inside of the intestine with suckers. Some also have hooks that strengthen their attachment.

Who in the family is at risk?

Outdoor pets, pets with fleas, or pets around infected animals are at risk of becoming infected with tapeworms. There is one species of tapeworm in dogs that can be transmitted to people resulting in serious disease. Children run a higher risk of coming in contact with a zoonotic parasite due to their play habits, attraction to pets, and pica (dirt eating).

How does infection occur?

Pets are commonly infected with tapeworms through the ingestion of fleas in the process of normal grooming, licking or chewing. Pets can ingest the eggs or larvae directly, through coprophagia (eating of fecal waste), or by eating rodents or other animals. Humans get the parasite from ingesting tapeworm eggs from infected fecal material.

How do I know if my pet is infected?

Most commonly, pet parents will notice tapeworm segments (pieces of the worm passed as the worm grows in the intestines) around the anal area or on the surface of the stool. The segments may be moving or may appear as grains of rice caught in the hair around the rectum. They may also be found in places where infected pets rest and sleep. By performing fecal exams, your veterinarian may also detect tapeworm eggs before you see any symptoms at home. Some pets, especially kittens and puppies, do become noticeably ill and symptoms can include:

- Vomiting
- Severe weight loss
- Loss of appetite
- Swollen stomach
- Severe anemia



How are they treated?

Tapeworms are treated with an injection or oral medications. Treatment may need to be repeated and reinfection with tapeworms can occur any time a pet has fleas. Common over the counter de-wormers are not always effective in treating tapeworms.

What can you do to protect the entire family?

- Schedule regular physical exams and fecal exams for your pets as recommended by your veterinarian
- Practice good, consistent flea control that is recommended by your veterinarian
- Quickly clean up after your pets to remove potentially infective eggs from your environment before weather, insects, or active migration of larvae allows the to spread
- Discourage and prevent children from eating soil
- Cover sand boxes when not in use, and avoid possibly contaminated areas
- Practice good hygiene for both your family and your pets



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