

Common Parasites of Companion Animals

This handout is general information only, not meant to replace medical advice from a licensed veterinarian.

Heartworm Disease – Heartworm Diseases is transmitted through the bite of a female mosquito. If undetected or untreated, Heartworm is almost always fatal to the host animal. Treatment via an immiticide can be hazardous to senior or debilitated pets. Treatment of healthy pets can require strict confinement, crating, and minimal activity, which can be just as hard on an otherwise active pet. Annual testing and monthly preventatives are available from your veterinarian which can greatly reduce the potential for Heartworm infection in both dogs and cats. Prevention is the best solution to this disease.

Fleas – Fleas have always been known as the most persistent parasite of companion animals. Some animals can carry a full infestation and not seem bothered or may itch occasionally, while other animals may break out in a severe skin infection from only one bite from a flea and will not stop scratching. Fleas will live in the animal's environment causing re-infestation if not fully treated. Anemia, skin infection, tapeworm infection, and general discomfort are general side effects from a flea infestation. Topical products and environmental pesticides are available from pet retail chains and veterinarians.

Ticks – In heavily forested areas or even urban areas with a heavy tree canopy, ticks can pose a real threat. Ticks can transmit the bacteria which cause Lyme disease to dogs, just as they can to humans. Lyme disease can manifest as general lethargy, single or multi-limb lameness, or general malaise. Detection of Lyme disease (and other less common tick borne diseases such as Anaplasmosis or Ehrlichia) is performed with a blood test. Once diagnosed, your vet can prescribe specific antibiotics for treatment.

Leptospirosis – “Lepto” can be transmitted from contact with contaminated urine from an infected animal (dog, squirrel, rat, fox, and raccoon), ingestion of infected tissue, or contact via mucus membranes (bite wounds). There is a vaccine available for dogs to combat two of the more common strains of “Lepto” but breakthrough infection is possible to high risk dogs – dogs that frequent areas of standing water, hunting dogs, and dogs that have a high prey drive towards urban wildlife. Symptoms include vomiting, lethargy, increased thirst, and muscle tenderness. A veterinarian can diagnose a Leptospiral infection with a blood test. Early detection can prevent advanced liver and kidney damage.

Intestinal Parasites – Roundworms, Hookworms, and Whipworms are some of the most common intestinal parasites that dogs and cats may contract. Some of these parasites may be passed from mother to baby via the mammary tissue, but the most common method of transmission is contact from infected fecal material. The most common places for infection are dog parks, kennels, shelters, and breeders. Detection of these parasites is easily performed with a fecal test – which can also detect intestinal protozoa such as Giardia and Coccidia. A simple round of medication can be prescribed for treatment. If left untreated, the parasite may cause extreme distress, and sometimes lead to death of the host in young or debilitated animals.

For additional information on common parasites found in Companion Animals, contact your local veterinarian office or College Park Animal Control at 240-487-3570 or vcooper@collegeparkmd.gov.