

INTESTINAL PARASITES

Intestinal parasites are parasitic worms that primarily inhabit the gastrointestinal (GI) tract. Parasites are a common and important cause of disease in dogs & cats. Although most people know about external parasites like fleas and ticks, many do not realize that intestinal parasites can also cause significant health problems. The most common intestinal parasites are roundworms, hookworms, tapeworms, and whipworms. The worms vary in size and potential disease severity, depending on the age of your pet and infestation severity. Intestinal parasites can cause malnutrition, weight loss, vomiting, diarrhea, and anemia. Besides making our pets sick, many of these parasites can affect people.

The most common signs and symptoms of intestinal parasites are:

Diarrhea (with or without blood or mucus), Scooting, Vomiting, Distended abdomen (belly), Weight loss, Decreased activity & Dull coat.



Roundworms: Parasites that live freely in the intestine, feeding off of partially digested intestinal contents. Their name is derived from their tubular or 'round' shape. If a growing puppy is infected with a large number of roundworms, the worms can stunt the puppy's growth, cause serious digestive upset, and result in excessive gas formation. These puppies often have a characteristic 'pot-bellied' appearance. Roundworms do not require an intermediate host to spread from dog to dog, but can be transmitted by ingestion of eggs that are shed in the feces of infected dogs.

Hookworms: Intestinal parasites of the cat and dog that get their name from the hook-like mouthparts they use to anchor themselves to the lining of the intestinal wall, where it feeds on blood. This blood-sucking, hookworms can cause severe anemia. Hookworms are one of the most significant intestinal parasites of the dog. The hookworm is approximately ½ to 1" (1-2 cm) long. The infective larvae enter the host either by mouth or through the skin, particularly the feet. Eczema and secondary bacterial infection can result due to irritation as they burrow through the skin.



Whipworms: Intestinal parasites that are about 1/4 inch (6 mm) long. They live in the cecum (a pouch that forms the first part of the large intestine) and large intestine of dogs, where they cause severe irritation to the lining of those organs. Whipworm infection results in watery, bloody diarrhea, weight loss, and general debilitation. Of all the intestinal parasites found in dogs, whipworms cause the most disease.

Tapeworms: Flat, segmented intestinal parasites of the cat and dog. Tapeworms belong to the cestode family of intestinal worms. There are several types of tapeworms, but the most common tapeworm species observed in dogs is *Dipylidium caninum*.



- *Dipylidium caninum*, the most common tapeworm of the dog, causes few problems in the adult dog but can result in digestive upsets and stunting of growth in puppies. The intermediate host of *Dipylidium* is the flea. Dogs get this type of tapeworm from eating an infected flea. The tapeworm uses its hook-like mouthparts to attach to the wall of the small intestine. The adult worms may reach up to 11 inches (30 cm) in length. As the adult matures, individual segments, called proglottids, are passed in the feces of an infected dog. The proglottids are about 1/2" (12 mm) long and about 1/8" (3 mm) wide and look like grains of rice or cucumber seeds. Occasionally they can be seen moving on the hairs around the anus, or more commonly, on the surface of freshly passed feces. As the proglottid dries, it becomes a golden color and eventually breaks open, releasing the fertilized eggs into the environment. A proglottid may contain as many as 20 tapeworm eggs.

- *Echinococcus*, another type of tapeworm, is important because it is zoonotic, meaning humans can be infected. The adult tapeworm is tiny, only about 1/4" (5-6 mm) long. *Echinococcus* develops inside cysts in various organs of its intermediate hosts: sheep, and humans. In humans, these cysts can involve the lungs or brain.



Intestinal parasites are treatable and even easier to prevent. Although intestinal parasites are treatable, remember that the best way to protect your pets against parasites is to keep them on parasite preventatives and have their stool checked at least once a year.

Many people are already protecting their pets and family from intestinal parasites and don't even know about it. Many monthly heartworm medications also contain a broad dewormer that protects your pets not only from heartworm disease but also from many intestinal parasites? If your pet is not already on monthly parasite preventatives, ask your veterinarian to discuss how you can protect your pets and family from those pesky parasites. Also, before you bring a new pet into the household it's important to have them checked by your veterinarian so that they do not expose your other pets or family to parasites.