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## **Worms - A Danger to Your Pet & Your Family**

Worms from your pet can cause disease in your family: another reason to have your pet's stool check for parasites at least twice yearly.

There are five common intestinal parasites in pets. Four of them are what people commonly think of as "worms". The fifth is actually a little one-celled organism called coccidia. How can people avoid contracting "worms"?

The most common kind of parasite that pets can get is the roundworm. When a puppy or kitten passes this worm in its stool, there is no missing it! Roundworms are very long, spaghetti-like shaped worms that are often coiled up the time they are observed. It's hard to imagine how such a big worm could come out of such a little puppy or kitten! A pet has three ways of getting roundworms: from larvae that come out of the mother's tissues during pregnancy that get into the uterus, from larvae that get into her milk, and from eating eggs that are in the soil or feces. The ingested eggs hatch in the intestine and the resulting larvae penetrate the intestinal wall to get into the blood stream. The blood from the intestines goes to the liver. The larvae penetrate the liver and migrate to the lungs where they are coughed up and swallowed. Once swallowed, they develop into adult worms that shed eggs into the stool. It is these eggs that veterinarians look for when they do a stool check. Roundworms can cause blockage of the intestines. They can also cause poor growth, a pot-bellied appearance, and occasionally diarrhea. All puppies and kittens should be given medication for roundworms. Once a dog or cat is an adult, its immune system is usually effective at controlling the roundworm.

The second and third intestinal worms are the hookworm and the whipworm. Puppies and kittens get these two types of worms in the same way that they get roundworms. However, adult hookworms and whipworms attach to the wall of the intestine and consume blood. Puppies and kittens can be born with hookworms and a heavy load of hookworms can consume enough blood to make the puppy or kitten very anemic. Whipworms are not detectable until the puppy or kitten is at least three months old. Generally, by three months, the puppy or kitten is old enough to handle a mild load of whipworms. Whipworms live in the colon and when they do become a problem they cause colitis. Colitis is characterized by mucousy diarrhea with a lot of urgency and occasionally some blood. Whipworms and hookworms are very tiny and generally cannot be seen in the stool. The veterinarian checks a stool sample for the microscopic eggs to diagnose an infestation.

People can get roundworms, hookworms and whipworms if they inadvertently eat stool of a dog that is passing eggs, or if they eat soil that has eggs in it. Good hygiene, including picking up the dog's stools and hand washing is adequate to prevent an infestation. This is the reason pets are usually not permitted on beaches or places where people walk barefoot. Dried feces with these parasites can invade the skin and cause serious, potentially fatal health problems.

Another type of intestinal worm is the tapeworm. The tapeworm only causes a problem if it is present in very large numbers. However, tapeworms pass segments into the stool that are easy to see and are quite disgusting. Most dogs and cats get tapeworms by eating fleas, but they can also get them by eating mice, birds and rabbits. People can get human tapeworms by eating raw beef that is infected or by eating beef liver that has the tapeworm.

Another type of intestinal worm is the coccidian (not contagious to people). Coccidia are microscopic organisms that invade the wall of the colon and cause colitis, often with blood loss. A puppy or kitten gets coccidia by living in less than sanitary conditions, usually with a lot of other puppies or kittens.