



COMPANION

ANIMAL HOSPITAL, SPRINGFIELD VA
Companions for Life

Parasites (Worms)

Dogs and cats are very susceptible to parasites. The most common internal parasites are heartworms, which live in the heart, and those that live mostly in the intestinal tract, such as **roundworms, hookworms, whipworms, coccidia, and tapeworms.**

Many puppies and kittens are born with **roundworms**, passed to them by their mother or by environmental contamination (contact with feces from animals carrying the parasite). Humans can also be infected with this parasite; for example, children who play in the dirt where infected animals have passed feces are at risk. Transmission to humans can occur anywhere there are feces containing the parasite (such as public parks). Because of the very high prevalence in puppies and kittens, we routinely de-worm these individuals, even if no eggs are found in a fecal sample.

Hookworms are much smaller and live in the intestines, firmly attached to the lining, feeding on the pet's blood. Hookworms are acquired either by ingestion of eggs or larvae, or by penetration of larvae through the skin. These represent a potential health hazard to humans as well as animals.

Whipworms, giardia, and coccidia are other internal parasites than can affect pets. Whipworms and giardia may be difficult to find in fecal samples. Multiple samples may be needed before a diagnosis can be confirmed.

Toxoplasmosis is usually associated with cats, and is often a worry for humans, especially pregnant women and immuno-compromised individuals. These individuals should not clean litter boxes or handle cat feces.

Tapeworms are well known parasites in many species, including humans. Each species usually has its own set of tapeworms, but some tapeworms can infect more than one species (for example, dogs and cats usually get the same tapeworms, most commonly the ones carried by fleas).

In general we rely on the owner's description of what they see at home. If unsure, the owner is encouraged to bring in the worms for identification, placing them in a small, moistened plastic bag.

Parasites in general are fairly manageable, and most can be readily eliminated with proper treatment and environmental cleanliness. Regular pick up of pet feces, not allowing it to accumulate in the yard, will help keep the parasites from getting in to the soil. Some of the parasite eggs can live in the soil for months and years. Pet owners are encouraged to get routine de-wormings for puppies and kittens, to have fecal samples checked on each pet at least once a year, and to maintain good hygiene when handling pets or when working around soil that might be contaminated with feces.