

PetAssist®

Companion's Corner

Avoiding spring health hazards

by PetAssist's consulting veterinarian, Dr. Charles Schwirck, DVM

For those of us that live in colder climates, spring's welcome arrival means it is time to get outside and enjoy the warmer weather. Of course that also means that our pets will be spending more time outdoors, increasing their exposure to potential health risks, such as parasites—both external and internal—as well as infections that are transmitted by insects that are more active in the warmer weather. Those individuals that live in warmer climates often protect against these risks year round but those living in colder climates that don't are advised to begin preventative treatments as soon we move into the warmer months.

The major bugs that are active in warmer weather and contribute to disease in our pets are fleas, ticks and mosquitos. Mosquitos can transmit heartworms to dogs and cats. Heartworm, as the name implies, is a parasite that will mature and set itself up in the heart and major blood vessels of the dog. Once there, it causes damage to the heart and blood vessels in addition to obstructing the normal flow of blood, which together can be life threatening. Heartworm disease in dogs can be treated but the treatment is difficult and not always successful. It is much easier and safer to prevent heartworm disease, and there are several effective and safe heartworm preventatives that are available.

Ticks are also known to carry several infectious diseases that are also transmitted by the tick's bite. These diseases include Lyme disease, anaplasmosis, ehrlichia and others. These bacterial-like diseases can cause a variety of symptoms that can have some serious and long lasting effects. There are antibiotics available to treat these infections, but once again, it is better to prevent the disease from occurring than to treat it once the disease is already present. There are also several safe and effective tick control products available as well as vaccines for Lyme disease. The additional importance of protecting our pets from exposure to ticks is that, by doing so, we are also protecting ourselves because people also get these tick-borne diseases. Although they are not transmitted directly from our pets, they come from a tick bite in the same way our pets get them, so preventing the ticks from attacking our pets helps protect you and your family from tick exposure, as well.

Fleas can also transmit disease but are more commonly a concern for their direct effect on our pets. Fleas feed off our pets, causing irritation, rashes and severe itching which can lead to secondary skin infections and extreme discomfort for our pets. Some pets are not only irritated by the flea bites but also have an allergic reaction to the flea them, which causes a more severe reaction that often leads to a skin disease commonly known as "hot spots," where the pet licks, bites and scratches itself so much that the skin becomes raw and infected. Fleas like to set up their breeding colonies in our homes and, once they've established themselves in our carpets, floors and baseboards, they can be very difficult to get rid of. These breeding colonies then serve as a constant source for reinfection of our pets and sometimes ourselves. As with mosquito transmitted diseases and ticks, it is much better to do what we can to prevent flea infestations than to deal with them once they are established. Many of the same products available for tick control and heartworm prevention will also help prevent flea problems.



We all want to enjoy the outdoors with our pets, and we can do so safely by using readily available preventative measures to prevent the insects that transmit diseases, and the diseases themselves, from ruining our enjoyment of the outdoors. The added benefit is that prevention keeps you and your family safe from these same diseases and nuisances as well.

For more information about pet parasites and the potential affect on pet owners, visit the website for Companion Animal Parasite Council at www.CAPCVET.org.

