You, Your Cat, & Parasites

Cat owners know the joy that these loving creatures bring to our lives. Because cats are independent by nature, they can be easier to care for when it comes to sharing our homes with them. Therefore, it's important to both you and your cat to keep it healthy and free of parasites. Monitoring your cat for any changes in its behavior, appetite, and water consumption and regular visits to your veterinarian at BRAC are necessary to maintaining the well-being of your cat.

It is relatively common for a cat to become infected with an internal or external parasite at some point in its lifetime. Parasites can affect your cat in a variety of ways, ranging from a simple irritation to causing life-threatening illnesses if left untreated. All parasites, particularly internal parasites (worms), can carry and transmit diseases to people. By having your pet tested for parasites semi-annually, you can protect your cat and your family from these potentially harmful parasites all year long.

Parasite Control Recommendations for Cats

The use of year-round heartworm and broad-spectrum parasite medications, as well as appropriate flea and/or tick products, is the foundation of an effective parasite control program for your cat. In addition, the following steps can be part of a proactive program to help keep your cat healthy and parasite-free:

- Have your cat examined semi-annually by your veterinarian and include a complete history.
- Provide pets cooked or prepared food (not raw meat) and fresh, potable water.
- Conduct fecal examinations 2 to 4 times during the first year of life and 1 to 2 times each year for adults, depending on the pet’s health and lifestyle factors.
- Administer dewormers biweekly to kittens from 3 to 9 weeks of age, followed by monthly treatments as a preventive.
- Also deworm nursing mothers (queens) along with their kittens.

Roundworms in Cats

Roundworms are the most common of the parasitic worms found inside a cat. Almost all cats become infected with them at some time in their lives, usually as kittens. Roundworms may be contracted in different ways, making them easy to spread and hard to control. Your cat may take in (ingest) infective roundworm eggs from the area where it lives or by eating mice or other small animals ("hosts") carrying young worms (larvae). Infection in kittens may occur through the mother’s milk.

How will roundworms affect my cat?
Adult roundworms live in the affected cat's intestines. Most cats will not have signs of infection; however, cats with major roundworm infections commonly show weight loss, dull hair, and a potbellied appearance. The cat may cough if the roundworms move into the lungs. You may notice adult roundworms in your cat's feces or vomit. They will appear white or light brown in color and may be several inches long often described as spaghetti.

How do I prevent my cat from getting roundworms?
Because roundworms can enter your cat's body in many different ways, it is essential to keep your cat's living area clean (regular cleaning of the litter box) and, if possible, prevent your cat from eating wild animals that may carry roundworms. Kittens should be treated for roundworms every 2 weeks between 3 and 9 weeks of age and then receive a preventive treatment monthly. Fecal (stool) examinations should be conducted 2 to 4 times during the first year of life and 1 or 2 times each year in adults. Nursing mothers (queens) should be kept on monthly preventive and treated along with their kittens.

Can humans be harmed by roundworms?
Roundworms do pose a significant risk to humans. Contact with contaminated soil or feces can result in human ingestion and infection. Roundworm eggs may accumulate in significant numbers in the soil where pets deposit feces. Children should not be allowed to play where animals have passed feces. Individuals who have direct contact with soil that may have been contaminated by cat or dog feces should wear gloves or wash their hands immediately.

Tapeworms in Cats

Tapeworms are long, flat worms that attach themselves to your cat's intestines. A tapeworm body consists of multiple parts, or segments, each with its own reproductive organs. Tapeworm infections are usually diagnosed by finding segments—which appear as small white worms that may look like grains of rice or seeds—on the rear end of your cat, in your cat's feces, or where your cat lives and sleeps. There are several different species of tapeworms that may infect your cat, each with stage(s) in a different intermediate (in-between) host, which the cat eats. Some use fleas as the intermediate host; others use small rodents, such as mice and squirrels, as intermediate hosts.

How will tapeworms affect my cat?
Cats rarely show any signs associated with tapeworm infection. Occasionally infection with uncommon tapeworms results in disease, however.
How do I prevent my cat from getting tapeworms?
Try to keep your cat from coming in contact with intermediate hosts that contain tapeworm larvae. Because fleas are an intermediate host for the most common kind of tapeworm, flea control is an essential prevention measure.

Can humans be harmed by tapeworms?
Certain tapeworms found in dogs or cats may cause serious disease in humans. Fortunately, these tapeworms (Echinococcus species) are uncommon in the United States and are readily treated by prescriptions available from your veterinarian. There are rare reports of Dipylidium (a common tapeworm in pets) infections in children, but these infections are not associated with significant disease.

### Hookworms in Cats

Hookworms are intestinal parasites that live in the digestive system of your cat. The hookworm attaches to the lining of the intestinal wall and feeds on your cat’s blood. Its eggs are ejected into the digestive tract and pass into the environment through your cat’s feces. Larvae (young hookworms) that hatch from hookworm eggs live in the soil and can infect your cat simply through contact with and penetration of the skin and through eating the hookworm larvae. It is common for hookworms to infect the host through a cat’s belly or feet as well as to be ingested during the cat’s routine licking (cleaning.)

**How will hookworms affect my cat?**
Hookworms will cause bleeding into the intestinal tract resulting in internal blood loss. They may cause death in young kittens. Blood transfusions may be necessary to keep young animals alive long enough for medications that kill the worms to take effect. Adult cats may also suffer blood loss from hookworms and can have diarrhea and show weight loss.

**How do I prevent my cat from getting hookworms?**
Similar to steps for prevention of other intestinal parasites, it is essential to keep your cat’s surroundings clean and prevent the cat from being in contaminated areas, if possible. Kittens should be treated for hookworms every 2 weeks between 3 and 9 weeks of age, followed by administration of a monthly treatment. Fecal examinations should be conducted 2 to 4 times during the first year of life and 1 to 2 times per year in adults. Nursing mothers should be treated along with their kittens.

**Can humans be harmed by hookworms?**
Some hookworms of cats can infect humans by penetrating the skin. This is most likely to occur when walking barefoot on the beach or other areas where pets deposit feces. Infection usually results in an itching sensation at the point where the larvae enter the skin and visible tracks on the skin. The condition is easily treated but can cause mild to extreme discomfort in the affected person.

### Coccidia in Cats

Coccidia are tiny single-celled parasites that live in the wall of your cat’s intestine. They are found more often in kittens, but they can also infect older cats. Cats become infected by swallowing soil that contains coccidia or other substances in the environment that may contain cat feces. Also, it is possible that rodents could eat the coccidia and contract a “resting” stage of the parasite. Cats that are old enough to hunt could then be infected when they hunt and eat these animals. Cats are more likely to get infected with coccidia by this method than dogs are.

**How will coccidia affect my cat?**
Coccidiosis, the disease caused by coccidia, is usually more serious in kittens but can occur in older cats. The most common sign of coccidiosis is diarrhea. Severe infections, especially in kittens, can kill them.

**How do I prevent my cat from getting coccidia?**
Coccidial infections can be prevented by cleaning your cat’s litter box regularly and by preventing your cat from hunting. Because coccidia are found most often in kittens, it is important to have kittens examined for the parasite as soon as possible.

**Can my dog get coccidia from my cat?**
A cat that is infected with coccidia cannot pass the infection to dogs and vice versa. Coccidial infections occur only by swallowing the coccidia in soil or cat feces or by eating intermediate hosts.