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PARASITES AND YOUR CAT

Below you will find information about the most common parasites affecting pet cats in the UK.

As a minimum, we advise all cats are treated routinely for fleas, and wormed according to risk.

The choice of product depends on a number of factors:

- Other parasite protection required – unfortunately no one product will treat all parasites. Therefore our vets will determine which is the best product combination for your pet depending on which parasites they are most at risk of.
- Pet personality and owner preference – some prefer tablets and others find spot-on preparations easier to apply.

At Greenbay Vets we tailor parasite protection to suit you and your pet. We recommend prescription vet-only products because they are tested to a high level to ensure maximum effectiveness and safety.

FLEAS

Fleas are insects which have a 4 stage life-cycle: eggs, larvae, pupae and adult fleas. Only adult fleas live on the pet – the rest live in your home and garden environment. Female fleas can produce over 2000 eggs in their life-time, so live fleas seen are only the tip of the iceberg. The whole life-cycle can take a few weeks through to 6 months; the pupae are very resilient and can lie dormant until the right conditions for hatching.

Adult fleas suck the blood of the pet and produce faeces which look like tiny black dots in the pet's fur. Flea bites can cause anything from mild irritation through to a severe allergy in your cat. Fleas also transmit a type of tapeworm (*Dipylidium caninum*) and potentially other infections.

Treatment for a flea infestation can be an expensive, time-consuming and frustrating process. Effective prevention is much simpler than curing an infestation. For effective flea prevention you should treat all your cats and dogs all year round, even if they don't mix with other animals. Even indoor only cats need to be treated as fleas can be brought in from outside. Any breaks/lapse in treatment will mean your pet is at risk of picking up fleas again. Once on your pet they will start rapidly breeding and laying eggs which will infest your home.

Prescription products bought from the vets help to prevent an infestation by effectively and quickly killing adult fleas. They also prevent any eggs that are laid from hatching out and/or kill the flea before they have a chance to lay any eggs. Different products are available to suit you and your cat e.g. tablets, spot-on preparations and long-lasting collars.

MITES

Otodectes (ear mites)

Ear mites are quite common and can be transmitted from mother to young, or from contact with other cats. They may cause ear irritation e.g. head shaking, scratching at the ear. The vet can usually diagnose and treat this quite easily.

Other mites can occasionally infect cats and may be looked for if your cat has a skin problem.

TICKS

Ticks jump onto cats (as well as other animals and humans), and become engorged as they take a blood meal. They are most active in spring and autumn, but can remain active all summer in cool damp areas.

Cats do not generally notice the tick feeding, but they can be irritating. The main concern with tick's feeding is transmission of disease; the significance of this in cats is not really known at this time.

There are prescription products available from the vets to help prevent problems from ticks. Most products kill ticks after they have attached and started to feed; they then die and drop off while small and hopefully before any transmission of disease.

If you find a tick on your cat, it is best to remove it, and we can do this for you. It is very important that the head is removed, as if the body is pulled off and the head left in it can cause problems. Tick hooks are available from us which can be used to safely 'twist' the tick out.

WORMS

Tapeworms

The most common tapeworm in cats is spread by fleas. Little white segments may be seen around the cat's bottom. Control is with worming treatment and dealing with the fleas. Cats can also become infected with tapeworms through hunting.

Roundworms

Roundworms live in the cat's bowels and look like you would expect a worm to look. Cats can become infected from hunting and as kittens from their mother. Although less well characterised than the risk from dog roundworms, it is possible that humans (especially small children) could become infected from eating worm eggs passed by infected cats.

To control the risk of roundworms in humans it is advised to worm all cats every 3-6 months depending on lifestyle and to cover children's sand pits so cats don't use them as a litter tray. Kittens need to be treated more regularly - we advise worming every 2 weeks until 12 weeks old, then monthly until 6 months old.

Prescription worming tablets and spot-on preparations are available from the vets to effectively treat all roundworms and tapeworms.

Lungworm (*Aelurostrongylus abstrusus*)

The cat lungworm, unlike the dog one, rarely seems to cause a problem.

TOXOPLASMOSIS

Toxoplasmosis refers to disease caused by a single-celled parasite called *Toxoplasma gondii*. Infection is common in many species of animal, but cats are needed for the parasite to complete its life cycle.

Toxoplasmosis rarely causes disease in cats, although many will be infected at some stage. Infection is more common in cats that hunt or are fed raw meat. Most infected cats will only shed oocysts (parasite eggs) for a short time. There are no drugs to prevent infection in cats.

Toxoplasmosis can affect humans and is of most concern to pregnant women and their unborn babies, babies and young children, elderly people and immunosuppressed people. It can cause inflammation of the brain, abortion, stillbirth, birth defects and problems with the nervous system and eyes. The risk to pregnant women occurs if they become infected while pregnant. Humans are infected by eating oocysts from cat faeces e.g. through contact with contaminated soil, or by ingestion of meat containing parasite cysts.

Research indicates that contact with cats or owning a cat does not increase the risk of infection in humans. Although the risk of transmission of *Toxoplasma* from a cat to its owner is very low, this can be reduced further by adopting the following recommendations:

- High risk people e.g. pregnant women should not handle the cat's litter tray
- Litter trays should be emptied daily
- Wear gloves when handling litter and wash hands afterwards
- Periodically clean the tray with detergent and scalding water
- Cover children's sandpits to prevent cats using them as litter trays
- Feed your cat commercial cat food or properly cooked food
- Wear gloves when gardening and wash hands after contact with soil
- Wash fruit and vegetables before eating them

Consumption of undercooked meat is a more common source of disease in humans. This can be avoided by thoroughly cooking meat:

- Meat should be cooked to a minimum of 58°C for 10 minutes or 61°C for four minutes to kill the tissue cysts. Microwaving is not a safe way to kill tissue cysts as the heating is uneven.
- Freezing meat at -12°C to -20°C for three days also kills tissue cysts.

For more information see <http://icatcare.org/advice/cat-health/toxoplasmosis-and-cats>.