

PARASITES

True or false: Although parasite infestation is a common health problem in developing countries, it's not a problem that exists in this country. Answer: False. And the real worrisome news is that the source for many parasite infestations in humans is our "best friends": our dogs.

Studies show that more than 1/3 of the nation's dogs are infected with intestinal parasites. These can be microscopic single-celled organisms, or larger worms that are several inches long. For complicated biological reasons, most puppies are actually born with a type of intestinal worm called Ascarids, otherwise commonly referred to as "roundworms". And the Centers for Disease Control estimates between one and three million people are infected each year in the U.S. from their dogs.

Statistics for some areas of the country are shocking: as many as 4%–20% of children in the some areas of the U.S. contract roundworms from their pets each year. In some parts of the country, especially the Southeast, transmission of these intestinal parasites is so prevalent that many children test positive for exposure to intestinal parasites and become sick. Children are one of the groups that are most susceptible to these infections because they are frequently grabbing and touching things, and then sticking their hands in their mouths without regard to whether they are clean. In our area of California, these problems are less common, but not absent. The diseases with the greatest chance of transmission to people are various intestinal parasites.

The good news is that these infections are entirely preventable. Using a year round parasite preventative product to treat pets and reinforcing common sense hygiene in children helps families reduce the risk of exposure to these conditions. The most common parasite preventative medications are Sentinel, Heartgard, and Interceptor. These are all once-a-month medications (chewable tablets) that are given to dogs to prevent the major types of intestinal parasites as well as heartworms. Sentinel also helps prevent fleas. They generally come in boxes of 12 tablets to last a year, and these medications can be purchased at any veterinary hospital. One tablet, once a month.

Preventing Zoonoses

Basic hygiene is essential in preventing transmission of these parasite infestations from pets to people. Parents must wash the family's pets regularly and teach children about hands and mouths. Instruct children to wash their hands after playing with pets, after playing outdoors, before eating, and to wash often. Kids don't wash their hands on their own. Parents must encourage this behavior.

Here are some easy ways to help protect your family from diseases that can potentially be carried by house pets:

- Wash your hands with soap and running water after coming in contact with dirt.
- Take your pet to the veterinarian on a regular basis and keep up with all recommended vaccinations.
- If your dog bites you, wash the area right away with soap and water.
- Wash your hands after handling your pet—especially before eating or preparing food.
- People with weakened immune systems should take special precautions, including never letting pets lick them on the face or on an open cut or wound, never touching animal feces and never handling an animal that has diarrhea.
- Don't let your pet eat feces they discover outdoors (or in the litterbox!).
- Remove your pet's fecal matter from your lawn or surrounding outdoor environment daily. Feces can be bagged and put in the trash or flushed down a toilet.
- Cover your children's sandboxes when not in use.
- Use appropriate methods to reduce mosquito populations in your outdoor environment.

