



Preventive Care

Parasites

External Parasites (Fleas and Ticks): Ticks carry a number of diseases, many potentially serious. Examples include Lyme Disease, Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever, Ehrlichiosis, Anaplasmosis, Bartonellosis, and tick paralysis.

Most dogs and outdoor cats should be on a regular monthly topical flea/tick product, preferably year-round. In recent years, we have found ticks on pets as early as January and as late as December – any “warm spell” (25-30 degrees) can cause ticks to become active, though the highest risk months are March through November.

Indoor cats should be on a preventative if there is a history of flea infestation within the past 8 months or if you move into a new house/apartment or acquire new pets. The American Association of Feline Practitioners (a group dedicated to feline health) recommends that all cats, regardless of lifestyle, be on preventive year-round.

If owners have concerns about using a topical product, there are some oral (pill form) products available, but they only provide coverage for fleas, not ticks. There are a number of topical products available; we can talk to you about the best option for your pet at your appointment.

Internal Parasites: Heartworm and intestinal worms are examples of internal parasites. Heartworm (worms actually living in the heart) is transmitted via mosquitoes, and intestinal worms are generally transmitted via the fecal-to-oral route, though many can be transmitted by ingesting rodents, birds, etc. Many of these parasites are potentially transmissible to humans (especially young children), sometimes with serious consequences. Our recommendations therefore are the following:

Heartworm – Dogs: All dogs should have a heartworm test annually. As stated above, this test not only shows heartworm exposure, but also Lyme, Anaplasma, and Ehrlichia (other tick-borne diseases), so it is important for general health assessment.

Young puppies are too young to test for heartworm, as it takes 6-7 months after exposure for the test to show up as positive. Puppies are placed on preventative and tested at the following year’s annual exam unless they have come from the southern states, then testing may be recommended earlier.

All dogs should be on monthly heartworm preventative to prevent transmission of the disease by mosquitoes. Heartworm cannot be transmitted effectively when the outside temperature is below the mid-60’s; however dogs can acquire intestinal parasites even in the middle of winter (think “poopsicles” – a great way to get worms), so monthly preventive (ie, Heartgard, Interceptor, etc.) should be continued year-round. (The preventives also contain an intestinal dewormer.)

Heartworm – Cats: Feline heartworm *may* be more common than we once thought, though it is still quite rare for us to diagnose feline heartworm disease in Maine. Owners of outdoor cats in particular though should consider monthly preventive. Cats are not the preferred host of heartworm but they can acquire a small number of worms, which can present an array of possible health problems - most commonly respiratory disease. At this time, there is no safe treatment for heartworm in cats; symptoms are treated until the worm(s) die on their own (which puts the cat at prolonged risk for cardiac and respiratory disease). Prevention is the best medicine!

Intestinal worms – Dogs: All dogs should be on year-round prevention to avoid infection with the more common intestinal worms (hookworms and roundworms). Dogs should have annual fecal exams, more often if there has been a problem with parasites. Puppies should have a fecal exam at least twice during the first year (almost all puppies and kittens acquire worms from their mothers, through the uterus or when they nurse, even if the mother was dewormed prior to pregnancy). All puppies will be routinely dewormed several times during their initial vaccination series. Routine heartworm preventives (Heartgard, etc.) also contain an intestinal dewormer, so just giving your dog's Heartgard monthly will "kill two birds with one stone".

Intestinal worms – Cats: Cats should have an annual fecal exam. Outdoor cats should ideally have a fecal sample checked twice a year. Indoor-only cats can contract intestinal parasites by encountering mice or other rodents indoors, sometimes without the owner even knowing about it. Owners of outdoor cats who are avid hunters should practice "empiric deworming" – periodic deworming based on the assumption that they have been exposed to intestinal worms through hunting (very common).

Please refer to www.petsandparasites.org for more information on parasite diseases of pets.