

THE SEASON FOR FLEAS, TICKS AND WORMS

A very common concern for pet owners at this time of year are tick bites. With the increasingly warm weather we are seeing many more pets troubled by these parasites.

Ticks are blood sucking arthropods that feed on mammals. They vary in size from 0.5mm larvae up to 1cm when a fully engorged adult. They are most active in warm wet weather and are found mainly in long grass, rough grazing or woodland areas. They are typically associated with deer or sheep but hedgehogs also commonly carry them.

The ticks move up to the ends of vegetation and can smell when a host is coming near. They actually position themselves with their front legs waving to catch onto a host as it passes. They crawl through the fur to the skin where they bite and attach and to the host skin. They cement their mouthparts in position with special cement that they secrete. They will feed for 2-14 days depending on the size of the tick. The largest female ticks can be 1 cm when fully fed. After feeding, the tick then drops off and continues the rest of its life cycle off the host. A tick only needs to feed once per year and the usual life cycle is 3 years.

The tick bite itself will often be markedly inflamed and usually a nodule forms at the site which will irritate the animal to a varying degree. Sometimes the animal will scratch or chew at the site so much that it can become quite badly infected. Even when the tick is removed or has fallen off the nodule can remain for some time. If the tick is incompletely removed so that the mouthparts remain embedded then the reaction to the bite will be ongoing as the mouthparts continue to irritate.

Occasionally ticks can transmit the organism that causes Lyme disease. It is unusual for this organism to cause illness in animals or in man, but blood tests show that it is relatively common to have been exposed to it. Many animals and people may successfully fight off infection.

However, if infection does occur it can be serious. In dogs infection can lead to a variety of symptoms including high temperature, painful joints, enlarged lymph nodes, lethargy and loss of appetite. It can be difficult to diagnose as the organism is hard to isolate. The severity of the disease varies, for milder cases with a more gradual onset, treatment with appropriate antibiotics is usually successful although there can be relapses. Cases with severe signs and rapid onset can be fatal. In man the disease usually causes skin rashes, joint problems and neurological signs.

A tick has to be feeding for 2-3 days before Lyme disease is transmitted so if ticks are removed from pets soon after attachment then the risk of Lyme disease is minimal. Equally if the pet is protected with a spot-on or spray product that kills ticks then they will die before transmitting disease.

Pets travelling abroad are at risk from several other serious tick borne diseases and for these pets it is very important that they are protected against tick bites. All pets returning to UK have to have a treatment applied before entering the country to try to prevent these tick borne diseases becoming prevalent here.

Effective tick removing hooks are cheap and available from the surgery – these are ideal for removing any ticks from your pet. The vet or nurse will be happy to show you how to use them or to help you remove any ticks. There is a new spot-on product available this year for dogs which is very effective in preventing ticks from attaching. If any do attach then they will be killed very quickly. There are also spot-on and spray products for cats.

If your pet is troubled by ticks or if you would like any further advice then please give us a call or pop in to the surgery.