

# Dog Care – Intestinal Parasites

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## **Can you catch parasites from your pet?**

Parasitic infections that can be transmitted from animals to humans are known as parasitic zoonoses.

### **1. Hookworms**

In dogs, hookworm infection occurs through ingestion or skin penetration of hookworm larvae found in the stools or soil contaminated by feces of an infected animal.

The larvae then develop and migrate to the intestines where they hook onto the intestinal wall and feast on the host's blood. The larvae of hookworms can penetrate the skin and infect humans through contact with soil or sand contaminated by feces of host dogs or cats. In a human host, the hookworm larvae do not migrate to the intestines and become blood-sucking adults as they do in pets. Instead, they move around under the skin and eventually die causing an inflammatory skin reaction known as cutaneous larva migrans, or "creeping eruptions". It is important to keep your pet free of hookworms with good hygiene, preventive medication and regular veterinary check ups. Also, keep stray dogs and cats out of sandpits and gardening areas.

### **2. Roundworms**

Roundworms are parasitic worms that are round in shape, live in the dog's intestines and consume partially digested food. Unlike hookworms, they do not attach to the intestinal wall, but literally swim in their food. Adult worms resemble spaghetti and may come out in the faeces or vomit of an infected dog. Transmission to dogs is through eggs in faeces which contaminate soil that may be ingested, eating a prey animal that is a host (usually rodents), mother's milk, or in utero. In dogs, roundworms cause diarrhoea, vomiting and in extreme cases pneumonia and intestinal obstruction. In humans, roundworms can cause a serious condition known as visceral larva migrans. Most victims are children who are infected when putting contaminated fingers into their mouths. Once ingested, the roundworm larvae, though not in its usual host, tries to complete its lifecycle. The roundworm gets lost in the human body, usually in the eye, dies and generates an inflammatory reaction that can cause blindness. Proper hand washing can prevent infection. Deworming of puppies and preventive medication will reduce environmental contamination.

### **3. Tapeworms**

There are various species of tapeworms that infect dogs, and this can occur in different ways, such as transmission from fleas, or by ingesting infected raw meat or offal, depending on the particular species of tapeworm involved. Tapeworms in the intestine can cause symptoms varying from unthriftiness and malaise, to colic and mild diarrhoea, depending on the degree of infection, parasite species and the age and condition of the affected dog. Transmission to humans of certain species of tapeworm usually occurs via accidental ingestion of the eggs present in dog faeces and can have serious repercussions. Preventive medication including regular worming and effective flea control, as well as avoiding feeding your dog raw meat or offal, will significantly reduce the chance of canine and human infections.

#### **4. Whipworms**

The only way a dog can contract whipworms is by ingesting the eggs. When a dog walks on ground infected by eggs, they are picked up on the paws and travel into the mouth when they lick their paws or any contaminated toys or food bowls. Whipworm eggs can survive extreme exterior conditions for months and even years. Within one to three months after the eggs are swallowed they hatch in the dog's intestine, attach to the wall and begin to suck blood and lay eggs. In dogs, whipworm can cause diarrhoea, weight loss and in some cases, anaemia. Whipworm infection in humans is extremely rare.

#### **Be safe, not sorry**

Children are more prone to contracting zoonotic parasites, as they tend to kiss and play more readily with pets. Parasite larvae are shed in the pet's faeces and may contaminate soil and sand. When children play in the contaminated areas and place their fingers in their mouths this allows the eggs to be ingested, causing infection. Hookworm larvae are capable of infecting a host through penetration of the skin. Be sure to pick up faeces promptly and avoid eating while playing with your pet. Frequent hand washing, as well as good general hygiene for people and dogs, is recommended. Routine check ups by your veterinarian along with parasite prevention, will not only keep your dog healthy but will reduce any risk to you and your family.