

Canine Tapeworm Infection

**What are tapeworms?**

The most common tapeworm affecting dogs and cats is called dipylidium caninum. This parasite attaches to the small intestinal wall by hook-like mouth parts. Though tapeworms are actually made up of many small segments—each measuring about 1/8-inch long—adult tapeworms may reach up to eight inches in length. As the adult matures, the individual segments break off from the main body of the tapeworm and pass into the dog’s feces.

Occasionally, the mobile segments can be seen crawling near the anus or on the surface of a fresh bowel movement. These segments look like grains of rice and contain tapeworm eggs, which are released into the environment when the segment dries. The dried segments are small (about 1/16-inch long), hard and golden in color. These dried segments can sometimes be seen stuck to the hair around the dog's anus.

A less commonly found tapeworm, called echinococcus, also occurs in dogs.

**How did my dog get tapeworms?**

In order for a dog to become infected with tapeworms, he/she must ingest a flea that contains tapeworm eggs. This process begins when tapeworm eggs are swallowed by flea larvae (an immature stage of the flea). Contact between flea larvae and tapeworm eggs is thought to occur most frequently in contaminated bedding or carpet. Next, the dog chews or licks his/her skin as a flea bites and the flea is then swallowed. As the flea is digested within the dog’s intestine, the tapeworm hatches and anchors itself to the intestinal lining.

A dog becomes infected with echinococcus when he/she eats a small mammal, usually a rodent, that contains the worm. Foxes and coyotes (and the wild rodents upon which they prey) are important in the life cycle of this parasite.

**What kind of problems do tapeworms cause for the dog?**

Tapeworms are not highly pathogenic (harmful) to your dog, but may cause debilitation and weight loss when they occur in large numbers. Occasionally, the dog may scoot or drag his/her anus across the ground or carpet because the segments are irritating to the skin in this area. The adult worm is generally not seen, but the white segments which break away from the tapeworm and pass outside the body rarely fail to get an owner's attention! Occasionally, a tapeworm will release its attachment in the intestines and move into the stomach. This irritates the stomach, causing the dog to vomit the worm. When this happens, a worm several inches in length will be seen.

**How is tapeworm infection diagnosed?**

An infection with dipylidium is usually diagnosed when the white, mobile segments are seen crawling on your dog or in the stool. Tapeworms are not usually detected by the routine fecal examination performed by the veterinarian. Because of this, veterinarians depend on the owner to notify them of possible tapeworm infection in the dog.

Echinococcus infections are harder to diagnose because the segments are small and not readily seen.

**How are tapeworms treated?**

Treatment is simple and very effective. A deworming medication that kills the tapeworms is given, either orally or by injection. It causes the tapeworm to dissolve within the intestines. Since the worm is usually digested before it passes, it is not visible in your dog's stool. These drugs should not cause vomiting, diarrhea or any other adverse side effects.

Flea control is very important in the management and prevention of tapeworm infection. Flea control involves treatment of your dog, as well as the indoor and outdoor environment where the dog resides. If the dog lives in a flea-infested environment, reinfection with tapeworms may occur in as little as two weeks. Because the medication that treats tapeworm infection is so effective, return of the tapeworms is almost always due to reinfection from the environment.

**How can I tell tapeworms from pinworms?**

Tapeworms and pinworms look very similar. However, contrary to popular belief, pinworms do not infect dogs or cats. Any worm segments seen associated with dogs are due to tapeworms. Children who get pinworms do not get them from dogs or cats.

**Are canine tapeworms infectious to people?**

Yes, although infection is not common or likely. A flea must be ingested for humans to become infected with the most common canine tapeworms. Most reported cases have involved children. The most effective way to prevent human infection is through aggressive and thorough flea control. The risk for infection with this tapeworm in humans is quite small, but does exist.

Echinococcus tapeworms are of more concern. These tapeworms cause a very serious disease when humans become infected. Hunters and trappers in the North Central region of the United States and the South Central region of Canada may be at risk for infection if strict hygiene is not observed. Rodent control and good hygiene are important in preventing the spread of this disease to humans. As with the more common tapeworm, infection with echinococcus is infrequent but possible.

**What can be done to control tapeworm infection in dogs and prevent human infection?**

* Effective flea control is key.
* Prompt deworming should be given when parasites are detected and periodic deworming may be appropriate for pets at high risk for reinfection.
* All pet feces should be disposed of promptly, especially in yards, playgrounds and public parks.
* Strict hygiene is important, especially for children. Do not allow children to play in potentially contaminated environments.