

TOXOCARA CANIS ADVICE FOR DOG OWNERS

During recent years there has been much publicity about *Toxocara canis* and the risks, real and imagined, associated with this parasite. Whilst the problem should not be exaggerated, it is necessary for dog owners and the public generally to know what they should do to minimise the risk.

WHAT IS IT?

Toxocara canis is a parasite that lives inside dogs' bodies. It is a round, white worm (looks like spaghetti) and it infects, most frequently, pregnant nursing bitches and young puppies. Infection can be passed on via the mother's milk and dog's droppings.

LIFE CYCLE

Pregnancy activates worm larvae which may be lying dormant in the bitch. Some will migrate to the womb, others to the mammary glands and into developing puppies. Other larvae will continue their lives in the intestine of the bitch.

By the time the puppy is a fortnight old, larvae already within it will have developed into adult worms. The puppy will receive even more larvae from the bitch's milk and from being licked by her. At the same time, the bitch will be re-infected when she cleans up her puppies droppings.

Toxocara eggs hatch in the puppy and the larvae burrow from the gut and migrate via the liver to the lungs where they may cause respiratory problems. Some larvae spread via the blood to other tissues where they stay dormant. Some are coughed up, swallowed and mature into adult worms in the digestive system. These lay thousands of eggs which are passed out with the droppings, to lie on grass, plants and soil, sometimes for many months, until ingested again by another dog to start the whole cycle of infection again.

HOW TO RECOGNISE WORM INFESTATION IN YOUR DOG

Whether you see worms or not, it can be assumed that all unwormed puppies and nursing bitches carry worms. Heavy infestation in puppies can cause breathing problems and even pneumonia. Puppies will also show signs of abdominal pain, may whine and adopt a characteristic straddle leg position. Infested puppies suffer retarded growth, harsh coat and have a poor, pot bellied appearance when the stomach and intestine is full of worms. In extreme cases the digestive system may become blocked. It is strongly recommended that you regularly worm your pregnant bitch and the puppies with a preparation available from your vet and follow his advice on administering times.

THE RISK TO HUMANS

The eggs of *Toxocara canis* are invisible to the naked eye but are sticky and may be picked up from soil, grass or the animal's coat/bedding and may be swallowed later.

Eggs which are swallowed can hatch into larvae in humans but will not develop into adult worms. However, these tiny larvae will travel around the body – usually causing no problems. Very rarely though, they can settle in particularly sensitive tissue such as the retina of the eye, where they may cause damage or even blindness. Each year about 50 cases involving eye damage are recorded. Although this number is small, the effects upon individuals are traumatic and it is prudent to take precautions.

Freshly passed dog droppings are not a direct hazard because the *Toxocara* eggs need about three weeks to mature outside the dog before they become infective. So, whilst contact with droppings is unpleasant, it does not present a risk from this point of view however, mature eggs can remain viable in the ground for some time. This is why children are more at risk (through sports fields and playing in the park - rolling on the ground) and must wash hands and faces thoroughly after playing.

WHAT TO DO

- Worm your dog properly both as a puppy and as an adult. Consult your vet for advice on the most effective wormer, as some products brought over the counter can be less effective.
- It is vital to worm the bitch as well as her puppies (seek advice from your vet)
- Do not discontinue worming because you see no worms passed. Remember dogs can become reinfected.
- When you have carried out a worming for an infestation or if you see worms in the droppings, be sure to pick up and properly dispose of it. It should be burnt or flushed down the w.c rather than buried or composted.
- Keep kennels and sleeping areas clean.
- Try and prevent your dog fouling grassed areas used by the public. If it does, clean it up immediately with a poop scoop or bag and dispose of in a "dog bin".
- Do not allow dogs to eat off crockery used by humans.
- Do not allow dogs to lick children's faces or share food such as ice cream and biscuits.
- Always wash your hands (and face if necessary) after handling a dog, particularly a puppy or nursing bitch.
- Ensure that children always wash their hands and face after handling a dog, puppy or nursing bitch or after they have been playing on grassed areas.

Following these simple straightforward precautions will protect the health of your dog, yourself and your family as well as the general public.

