



Understanding Flea, Tick, Mite and Worm Control (part 1)



We understand parasite control is a complete minefield these days, and it can get very confusing. There are now a large number of parasites we can cover for (fleas, ticks, mites, intestinal worms, heartworm, lungworm etc.), and a massive array of different medicines available to do this. However, there is not yet a single treatment available which covers for all parasites.

The next set of articles will come in a four part series. I will go through what parasites we can cover for, and why it is so important to prevent them. In the final article, I shall explain what each of the currently available treatments does and doesn't cover, and how they can be used together to ensure complete protection. I hope this will reduce some of the confusion and help you to decide which treatment protocol is best for your pet.

This week, I will be covering fleas and ticks.

Fleas

Fleas and their eggs are everywhere and keeping them away from your pet is virtually impossible (even indoor cats are at risk of fleas!). They cause constant irritation, leading to scratching, over-grooming, stress, a poor coat and, in some cases, anaemia. If an animal becomes allergic to fleas, which is very common, a single bite from a flea can cause severe inflammation and skin damage very quickly. **They can also bite you!**

Your pet may pick fleas up from the environment outside, from other pets and wildlife and from inside the home. It is important to remember that only 5% of a flea's lifecycle is on the animal - the other 95% (eggs, larvae and pupae) takes place in the environment, most notably **in your home**. A single flea can lay up to 50 eggs a day, so your pet would need to bring in only a very small number of fleas for your house to become 'infected'.

If your pet has fleas, you are unlikely to see live fleas - they move extremely quickly and are often groomed out. You are more likely to see 'flea dirt' (flea faeces) when you part the fur or brush the coat. 'Flea dirt' looks just like 'normal dirt' (tiny black/brown specks) but is actually digested blood. We can test whether the dirt in your pet's coat is 'normal dirt' or 'flea dirt' by performing a simple 'wet paper test' (see the picture on the next page).





The application of an effective control product throughout the year (monthly or 3-monthly depending on the product used) will prevent your pet from picking up fleas and significantly reduce the risk of fleas being brought into the house. However, if your pet does pick up fleas, remember it is essential to treat him/her, any other pets you may have, **and your home** (for example, wash bedding and sofas, Hoover carpets and apply household sprays).

Ticks

The threat from ticks is an increasing concern, with their abundance and distribution growing at alarming rates. Not only do the ticks cause irritation to your pet at the site of attachment, they carry and transmit some serious diseases and, though rarely, can cause acute paralysis (tick paralysis). Also, due to both climate change and increasing pet travel, we are now seeing foreign ('European') species of ticks and **life-threatening tick-borne diseases not previously seen in the UK**.

Ticks can vary in shape, colour and size, and will attach to any mammalian species (dogs, cats, deer, rabbits, sheep and humans.) They are predominantly found in grassy or woodland areas and are most active in Spring and Autumn but can be seen at all times of year. They are usually found around an animal's head and ears, neck, groin, armpits and feet.

Tick-borne Disease

In 2016, the first ever true outbreak of **Babesiosis** in the UK was reported in **Harlow, Essex!** Babesiosis is one example of a 'tick-borne disease', a disease which is spread from animal to animal via tick bites. Babesiosis is caused by the Babesia parasite, which infects and destroys red blood cells causing anaemia, jaundice, fever, loss of appetite and lethargy.



The more common, and most widespread, tick-borne disease found in the UK is **Lyme's disease** caused by the Borrelia bacterium. Both cats and dogs can be infected with Lyme disease but cats do not tend to show any signs. In dogs, Lyme's disease can be challenging to diagnose but they may show intermittent and shifting lameness, fever, lethargy, reduced appetite and enlarged lymph nodes. Animals do not tend to show signs of disease until months after they are infected, but if left untreated, it can lead to a chronic and debilitating disease, and can be fatal. Humans can also contract Lyme's disease, but you cannot get Lyme's disease directly from your pet - an infected tick has to bite you too.

The final article of this series will describe the products available to help repel and kill ticks. However, even if you do use tick control, you should regularly check your cat and dog for ticks, including between the toes, under the armpits, and in and around the ears. If you see a tick on your dog or cat, do not just pull it off, and do not apply vaseline in an attempt to suffocate it. These do not work and can lead to complications. You should either take your pet to the vet or remove the tick with a specific tick remover.



If you have any questions about fleas or ticks please do get in touch. In the next article, I shall discuss mites and the intestinal worms.