



THE LABRADOR RESCUE TRUST

ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO FLEAS, WORMS AND PARASITES IN DOGS

WORMS

The advice on worms has been very kindly written by Robert White-Adams MRCVS, who regularly writes informative columns in The Trust's 'Labradors Forever' magazine

Vets (and other health professionals) advocate worming your dog regularly – this is not just a whim or fancy – but a response to some very real health risks posed by worm infestations. And there are many different types of worm to consider - roundworms, tapeworms, lungworms, heartworm, hookworms, whipworms... the list goes on. Admittedly – the prevalence and severity of each of these worm types varies enormously – some are virtually harmless – others can – and frequently do cause serious illness – even death – in puppies and adult dogs.

We also tend to think of worms as hiding out within the gut – and therefore not doing much damage – however, virtually all of those worms listed above start out as eggs, then larvae before becoming adult worms in the gut – and those larvae like to go on a little journey around the body - traversing around some pretty important structures (including the heart, the lungs and the liver) leaving a trail of destruction in their path - before making their way to the intestines to settle down, have a good feed, interrupt normal digestion, suppress the immune system and start chucking out thousands of microscopic eggs that pass out with your dog's faeces.

I have a bee in my bonnet because dog owners everywhere are becoming complacent about intestinal worms - parasites that live and feed from the lining of your dog's guts - either believing that worms aren't a problem or that their dog couldn't possibly have worms because none have been seen in its poo....

As misconceptions go - these are both massive ones. All dogs pick up worms - and in the case of the most common worm infection, *Toxocara*, the eggs are everywhere (surviving up to two years in the environment) and it only takes 20 days for an ingested worm egg to become an adult worm alive and well, stuck on the intestine wall and feeding, and laying thousands of eggs into every motion your dog passes.... Eggs that are microscopic - you can't see them but trust me they are there..... you can only see them if you put a sample under the microscope. By the time you actually see worms in your dog's poo, the infection is so severe that there is either no free gut-space for worms to latch on inside your dog (ewww!) – or that there are too many dead ones for your dog to digest so they are passing out whole.

And more worryingly, this really does matter - sometimes these worms go astray- either getting lost on their way to the dog's intestine and causing all sorts of damage in all sorts of places - or in some worm species, the worms can even infect humans. Every year in



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the UK, around 100 children suffer severe retinal damage (often complete blindness) from damage caused by *Toxocara* worm larvae - in over 50% of these cases – the family of the affected children don't even own a dog - the infection has come from someone else's pet.

The problem is - worm eggs are really really hardy - once in the outside world, your dog's poo is quickly washed away - but the eggs survive - despite the weather - for up to 2 years.... and can spread many miles in the general transit of dirt and debris of the world. One study took samples from the earth of children's play areas which had strict "no dogs" policies – and found *Toxocara* eggs in 25% of them! - they really are everywhere. It infuriates me that in our society we would never tolerate someone leaving a loaded gun lying around for children to play with - and we are quick to cry out (and sue!) anyone and everyone at even the slightest hint of a radiation or toxic emission that might affect our children's health - and yet how many of you are sitting reading this with an unwormed dog in your house - a potentially loaded weapon?.....

So let me ask you again - **when did you last worm your dog?....** But before you answer, remember: - the only wormers that boast a 100% kill rate are either only available from your vet, or from behind the counter at a pet-shop or pharmacy. Anything you can get "off-the-shelf" will leave some worms behind.

Toxocara eggs are everywhere - and infection takes just 20 days.....
So think about it - are you sure your dog doesn't have worms?.....

So why am I writing about this so strongly? ... well - I blame the credit crunch! Data from veterinary wholesalers suggests sales of proven, effective worming products are down between 20-30% over the last year - and in my own Practice we have seen a startling trend in puppies and dogs arriving in their new homes without first being treated for worms by the breeders. It would appear that we have forgotten the need to treat worms.

And the proof has been seen in my clinic - this summer has seen a first for me - I have seen whole litters of puppies (and kittens) dying from anaemia caused by nothing more than (overwhelming) infections with common intestinal worms. A little less ignorance and a few pounds spent on good worming treatments would have been all that was needed to save those lives.

Complacent breeders aside, being a dog owner carries responsibilities - (being a dog rehome carries even more!) - but even though we are all feeling the pinch - letting your dog go unwormed for months at a time not only poses risks to their health - but also the health (and sight!) of young children in direct contact - not to mention the intangible numerous pets and children that may come into contact with those hardy little eggs that those worms are producing even as we speak.



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Don't get me wrong – not all of the worms that dogs get are infectious to us humans – but enough of them are. And as much as some believe there is no longer a problem – there is still plenty of evidence that those worms are out there and causing problems.

And its not just humans that suffer – in my dairy farm vetting days I had a few farmers with fields that were frequented by dog walkers – those poor old cows – not only did they have enough problems with their own specific cattle worms– some of the worms I have mentioned cycle between dogs and cattle – and can cause serious disease – even fatalities - in cows too.

And what makes it all so crazy is that all of this is so easily prevented.

Which brings me on to even more bad news from the worms.....

An emerging threat to your dog's health in the form of a parasite called *Angiostrongylus* - or more commonly, "French Heartworm" (or confusingly, "Lungworm" even though it has no relation to the lungworms we have always seen in puppies!).

This worm is not like the more traditional intestinal worms I have written about above - rather than set up home in the intestines, where a few worms cause little harm to their host (it being their eggs that are of bigger concern), the French Heartworm likes to wander and roam around the heart and major blood vessels supplying the lungs.... Not a good place for a foreign invader to be - and unsurprisingly, infection with only a few worms can cause major problems.

I am sad to report that over the summer things have continued to change, and now reports of *Angiostrongylus* infection are more and more common. In my own Practice we have had one patient that nearly died from a full-blown clinical infection, and we have also been fortunate to detect infection in two other patients as part of other investigations and before the infection had become manifest clinically. It would very much appear that *Angiostrongylus* has found its feet in the UK and is here to stay.

(Please also read the Footnote to this Veterinary Help Sheet which goes into greater detail about the threat posed by Lungworm).

And the further bad news? You may already know that infections can be contracted by dogs eating slugs, snails or frogs?..... However, latest research has shown that infection is possible just from the slime trails left by slugs, snails or frogs - and even from just drinking water from puddles of ponds that may have washed over the slime. Scary news indeed since this means that all but the most agoraphobic of dogs is very much at risk from this newcomer parasite.



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Particularly when - as things currently stand - there is only one worming treatment currently available that has a proven license for completely clearing *Angiostrongylus* infection - the commonest worming pills - even the ones you get from the vet - just aren't up to the job.

In my Practice we have always aimed to treat every patient as an individual - tailoring our preventative healthcare advice to take into consideration the various risks posed to each pet by the different species of worms and external parasites (e.g. fleas, ticks, mites, lice) - as well as factoring in who the dog lives with - and what risks may be posed to children, the elderly, or ill people who are frequently in contact with the dog.

This year, our conclusion for nearly every canine patient we see is that the dog just isn't well enough protected - if at all. Worming advice is often inadequate, awareness of the risks is just frighteningly poor, treatments are being given far too infrequently - and most worryingly of all, the treatments being chosen just aren't up to the job.

When did you last worm your dog? Was it recently enough? Most worming treatments have no residual action - they kill what is there on the day and are gone. If you answered "about 3 months ago" is that often enough? - Remember, some worm infections can happen in just 20 days!

All dogs should be wormed - the least at-risk dogs should be wormed at least four times a year - and higher risk families (where a dog is around young children, the very elderly or immunosuppressed) or dogs (heavy hunters/scavengers) should be wormed much more frequently. And while you are at it - use a decent product - there are many commercially available products that have a kill-rate of less than 80% - so they miss out 1 in every 5 worms.... or can only kill half of the species of worms that need treating - pretty useless huh! In my clinic we only stock products that are proven to both have a broad spectrum of activity and are 100% effective.

And are you sure the product you used is treating the things you need to be treating? - like French Heartworm? - the little blighter appears to like the UK and is here to stay - and appears to be spreading.

For more information - check out: www.lungworm.co.uk.

With the credit crunch biting, every penny counts. But we should still be worming our dogs. To do otherwise is a false economy and a dangerous game. More often and with better products. And this is finally where I get to impart some good news... as the worming challenges we face have changed - so have the products we have available to help. We can help you worm your dog (and control other parasites) quicker, easier, more effectively and cheaper. And your vet should be happy to offer their advice about this for free!



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They are not expensive – and they are easy to use – comprehensive worming treatment for your average Labrador is unlikely to cost more than £10 per treatment – and if you use regular flea or tick treatment too there are some great newer combined treatment products available.

All-in-all – cheap, simple, effective.... but essential.

Just don't forget to ask about French Heartworm! - and then - talk to your friends who have dogs - and their friends - and spread the word. Good preventative healthcare - keeping our best friends healthy and well (and protecting the health of those around us too) - is not a secret to keep!

And now to some external parasites – TICKS, FLEAS, MITES and BITING BUGS...

TICKS

TICKS (blood-sucking parasites) can be as small as a poppy seed and are not just an occasional nuisance or a passing irritation for people and animals. They can cause serious debilitating disease.

Due to changes in land management and the climate, tick numbers have escalated and so has the incidence of tick-borne disease. It is important to be aware of their presence and the risks that they pose.

Ticks not only cause skin irritation, they can also spread a number of infections, such as *Borreliosis* (also known as Lyme disease), which can be a seriously debilitating disease in canines, equines and other animal species, as well as in people. Correct tick removal is vital in helping prevent disease transmission. Tick-borne disease is not just a rural issue. Infected ticks have been found in urban parks and gardens.

Please also read Help Sheet 6 which gives further guidance on the extra precautions that are needed when travelling outside the UK to prevent other tick borne diseases.

FLEAS

Adult fleas are small wingless insects with extraordinary jumping ability. They will hang onto your dog's fur with their claws, and their needle-like mouth parts bite through the skin to suck up blood. Sometimes all you will see is 'flea dirt' (small brown flecks in the fur). Fleas can lay 30+ eggs a day and these eggs drop to the ground and their larvae will hatch and hide in dark places on the ground, in carpets or soft furnishings. The larvae feed on flea droppings and other debris before developing into cocoons. Adult fleas emerge from their cocoons when they sense that a dog or other animal host is near. The cycle which can take as little as 12 days or as long as several months can then begin again. If you find fleas on your dog, their eggs, larvae and pupae will also be found in your pet's bedding and the carpets and upholstery in your home.

Fleas are very common in dogs throughout the UK and not only can they be a nuisance to your canine friend they can also affect human health. Fleas can cause disease including flea allergy dermatitis and anaemia. Pets can also become infected with tapeworm by swallowing infected fleas during everyday grooming.



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MITES

The commonest mite affecting Labradors is the fox mange mite, otherwise known as Sarcoptes. The mite causes infections in a variety of wild animals but can also spread to dogs. During infection, the mites burrow deep into the skin and cause intense irritation.

In younger dogs we also see problems with ear mites and another skin mite called Demodex.

LICE

Lice are small, wingless insects that chew and bite skin to release blood and exudate to feed from. They are usually only seen in puppies that have been bred in poor conditions.

Treatment of ticks, fleas, mites and lice

Treatment is easy.... But to be honest - why wait to treat when you can prevent! These days we are fortunate to have an excellent range of highly effective flea treatments. The original was a product called Frontline, but there are now spot-ons that act to treat and/or prevent against mite, lice and tick infections too. AND, some of them even take care of the worming too! As ever, ask your vet to recommend a product that will provide the protection your pet needs.

And just a final note on ticks.....

Ticks are the hard boys of the parasite world. Even the best preventative treatments available can occasionally fail. However, tick removal is a quick and simple procedure, and knowing how to correctly remove ticks is a great trick to have in your armoury, and can prevent a life time of ill health and physical pain. For comprehensive information on tick-borne diseases in people and pets, and for tick-removal, visit the BADA website (www.bada-uk.org) where further information can be found. The Labrador Rescue Trust also sells a proven and effective tick remover.

The Trust wishes to extend their most grateful thanks to Bobby White-Adams for his invaluable contribution to our rescue work.

This help sheet has been written by Robert White-Adams MRCVS. Robert has extensive experience working in mixed and small animal veterinary practice and anything to do with Labradors. He got his first and now sadly missed TLRT dog in 2001. Robert opened his own veterinary practice in 2008 which welcomes all pets, but especially Labradors.

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These Information Sheets are intended to serve as a guideline to new homes and foster homes. They are the result of many years of experience from our helpers and we hope that they provide a useful insight. Please note that these are only guidelines and The Labrador Rescue Trust, its helpers and officers make clear that it is the responsibility of each home/foster home to recognise the needs of their dog and to react to those needs. The Trust, its helpers and officers cannot be held responsible for the behaviour of any individual dog.

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