

Internal Parasites in Cats

This handout is designed to give you an overview of some of the internal parasites that can infect your cat. For more detailed information, refer to our separate information sheets on roundworms, hookworms, whipworms, tapeworms and heartworms.

Are there different sorts of internal parasites or worms?

There are several types of internal parasites that cause problems in cats. These include roundworms, hookworms, tapeworms and heartworms.

Are these infections serious in the cat?

Intestinal worms can be a serious problem in young kittens. Hookworms can cause anemia and roundworms can lead to poor growth and development.

Intestinal parasites are rarely life-threatening in adult cats, and are usually seen in debilitated animals or those that are immunosuppressed.

Heartworm disease is a major life-threatening problem in dogs, and becoming more of a threat to cats. Heartworm disease is transmitted by mosquitoes.

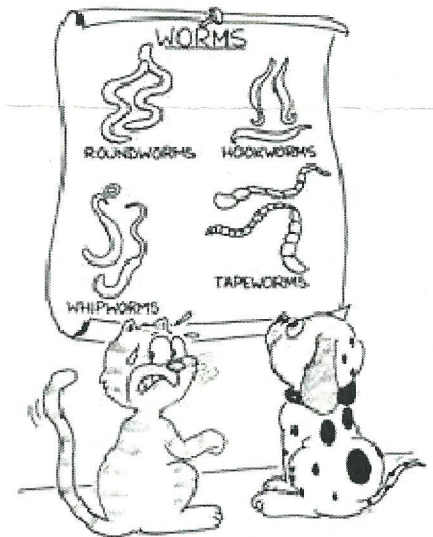
What will happen if my cat gets worms?

Roundworms

If a growing kitten is infected with a large number of roundworms, the worms can stunt the kitten's growth, cause serious digestive upsets and result in excessive gas formation. These kittens have a characteristic 'pot bellied' appearance. Roundworms are free-living in the intestines. They do not require an intermediate host to spread from cat to cat, but can be transmitted from cat to cat via infective eggs shed in the feces.

Hookworms

Hookworms are one of the most pathogenic intestinal parasites of the cat. The hookworm is approximately ½ to 1" (1-2 cm) long and attaches to the lining of the small intestines, where it feeds on blood. As a result of blood sucking, hookworms can cause severe anemia. The infective larvae can enter the host either by mouth or through the skin, particularly the feet.



Tapeworms

Some species of tapeworms infect cats directly, while others require an intermediate host, such as a flea, rodent or bird to transmit disease. Some tapeworms cause few problems in adult cats, but can result in digestive problems and stunting of growth in kittens. Still other species are zoonotic, meaning humans can be infected.

Heartworms

Heartworm disease is an uncommon disease in cats, but is increasing in incidence, especially in certain areas of North America. Heartworm disease causes a sudden onset of coughing and rapid breathing, weight loss and vomiting, symptoms that are also associated with several other, more common, diseases in the cat. Occasionally a cat that is infected with heartworms will be found dead, and the diagnosis will be made on a post-mortem examination. Heartworms are large worms reaching 6–14 inches (15–36 cm) long. They are primarily located in the heart and adjacent blood vessels.

This client information sheet is based on material written by: Ernest Ward, DVM

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