

## **PET WELLNESS PODCAST – EPISODE 20**

### **The Scoop on Poop; the Annual Parasite Check**

Hello and welcome to the Pet Wellness Podcast with your host, Dr. Mike Bondar, a veterinarian with a passion for all things pet experienced in holistic medicine, pet training and you guessed it, pet wellness. This is a show where we not only talk about pet problems, we give solutions and suggestions for optimizing your pet's health. Each week you'll hear thought-provoking advice and interviews as well as actionable tips you can implement in your daily life. And now, here's your host.

Hey everybody, it's Dr. Mike and welcome to another edition of the Pet Wellness Podcast! Today's episode is unique, to say the least, and frankly, I have to be honest, it's going to be crap. And that's because we're talking about your pet's poop. So, pull up a stool and get ready for me to dump a load of information on what you need to know about your pet's feces. Don't worry, this won't be a long podcast. It will be over in a hop, skip and a dump. I mean, jump. Here we go. So why is checking your pet's stool so important? I mean, what's the scoop on the poop? Well, the fact is that pets are much more prone to getting internal parasites than we are based on their daily habits. Most dogs, for instance, are very curious about what's on the ground and spend a lot of time with their noses down low. This is the perfect opportunity for microscopic parasite eggs to enter the body either through the nose or through the mouth or even through the skin. Plus, as I'll tell you later if a pregnant dog or cat has parasites, they'll almost always pass it on to their kittens or puppies. Some dogs and cats, especially puppies, have this awful habit of eating their own stool or someone else's. We call this disgusting habit Coprophagy where the "copro" stands for feces and the "phagy" stands for the act of eating. This is without a doubt the easiest way for your pooch to pick up parasites from a taste of the waste. So, what kind of parasites are we talking about? Well, there are actually six main types. Four of them are worms in their adult stage and two are sort of single-cell parasites that are really invisible to the human eye. And I'll address each one of them individually in a minute. But here's the interesting thing about all parasites that makes pet owners like yourself not realize what a true problem they are. First, it's rare to see the adult worm forms. There are two reasons for that. One is that in two of the four adult worm species, the adults are so small you'd never see them. And the other two rarely show up outside the body because they kind of like to hang out inside the body in the pet's stomach or intestines. What normally ends up outside the body are the eggs and larvae laid by these worms. And again, those are all invisible to the naked eye. The second thing is that most puppies and kittens who have internal parasites can act perfectly normal. You would never know there's anything wrong with them. But there is. So that's why most people feel at ease about the feces. So, let's dive into the type of parasites our pets can get, and what dangers they pose to our pets and to us. And finally, what we can do to reduce the likelihood of these parasites becoming a problem.

As I mentioned before, there are six main parasites that affect our pets. The most common one is Roundworms. And Roundworms are the most common parasite in cats and dogs in the world, not just here in North America. Dogs and cats become infected with Roundworms

when the worm's eggs develop into larvae which are not visible to us but are present in the feces. So, your pet can pick up these larvae by sniffing or eating stool, eating contaminated soil, licking their contaminated paws, or even drinking contaminated water. Yuck, right. Puppies can get it from their mothers before birth and even after birth when they're nursing. Kittens, on the other hand, can only contract the parasite from their mother's milk, and not while they're in the womb. So, what are the health risks of Roundworms to pets and people? Well, in puppies and kittens, the most common signs are fairly benign, and they include a bit of a pot belly, maybe a dull, dry hair coat, or a failure to gain weight because the worms are stealing nutrients from what the puppies and kittens are eating. However, in some situations, I've actually seen intestinal issues like puppies vomiting adult worms. And I try to calm owners down by joking that they now have some bait for fishing. Although I've never seen it in practice, there are actually reports of larvae migrating into the lungs and potentially causing pneumonia. I think my biggest concern about Roundworms is they have the potential to be zoonotic. And zoonotic, by the way, is when an animal disease can be transmitted to people. Now, we're pretty careful when it comes to scooping the poop. In other words, we aren't a fool when it comes to the stool. But our children aren't always that careful. And most Roundworm infections in people come from accidental ingestion of the larvae or even the larvae entering through the skin. And the easiest example is a child playing in a sandbox that has some chocolate nuggets hanging around. For those of you who are parents out there, I really don't want you to panic, because incidences like this are extremely rare. But it stresses the need for us to clean up after our pets, especially when they're around children or immunocompromised adults. So, let's just not be nerds about the turds, okay? These buns are getting crazy.

Now, the second most common parasite in dogs, but less commonly in cats, are hookworms. I'll say this, I've seen electron microscopic images of hookworms, and they seriously look like massive eels with sharp teeth. When it comes to hookworms, pets can become infected through the mouth or the skin. And puppies, they can become infected from the mother's milk. But this doesn't occur in kittens, thankfully. Now, these guys aren't nearly as benign as Roundworms. And I've seen pets develop anemia from blood loss when they're infested with hookworms because they bite into the intestinal lining and suck blood. They can actually be life-threatening to certain pets like Roundworms, hookworms are also zoonotic and can affect humans. So again, that's why we have to clean up after our pets. A third worm that gets its name from its whiplike tail is the whipworm. And pets can get whipworms in the same way they get Roundworms in the body. Whipworms also attach to the lining of the intestine, just like hookworms. But they're much less harmful and typically don't cause any health concerns. When they do cause issues, it's usually diarrhea that sometimes can have blood in it. And thankfully, although zoonotic transmission of whipworms to people is extremely rare, finally on the worm front is the well-known tapeworm. Tapeworms are flat and thin, but they can grow as long as a foot in length. They are made up of many segments which can be visible in your pet's stool. If you look closely, they look like grains of rice, except this rice moves. You'll often see them if you lift up the tail of an infected pet. So how do pets get tapeworms? Well, they get them from eating infected fleas or lice, which is the reason why good flea control is a must for every pet. They can also get them from eating rodents, which is why I've seen so many tapeworm infestations in barn cats. They don't do a lot of harm, but like Roundworms, they can steal nutrients from the food

and make a pet look somewhat unthrifty. I've never heard of any pet-to-human transmission when it comes to tapeworms. I want to now quickly touch on the other two parasites that I mentioned earlier, which are microscopic single-celled parasites. One is called coccidia. Young pets are most often infected and can become quite dehydrated and very sick from the bloody watery diarrhea that this parasite can cause. It's also very contagious between puppies and kittens. So, breeders need to be really careful when it comes to Coccidia. And thankfully, most are well versed on how to treat it in their litters if it shows up. The final single-celled parasite is called giardia. And as a human, if you've ever traveled to Mexico and spent half of your vacation on the toilet with diarrhea, with what we call Montezuma's Revenge, then you may have actually contracted giardia from contaminated water. And pets get giardia the same way from contaminated water. And in my experience in practice, this is one of the more common causes of diarrhea. And my patients, thankfully, it's easy to treat. So now that we know a little bit about the six organisms that affect pets and us, let's examine how we can diagnose these parasites and how we can prevent them or treat them.

The easiest way to diagnose most of these parasites is by examining the pet's feces. And the feces need to be fairly fresh, no more than four to 6 hours old. So, no moon rocks or fossils. The feces should be somewhat malleable. One test that your veterinarian can run on the feces is called a fecal flotation, and I won't go into any details on how it's done, but fecal flotations will help diagnose five out of the six parasites that we talked about. To diagnose them all, I started recommending moving up to the next level of stool examination, where you do a fecal flotation and a giardia antigen test, as giardia rarely shows up on a routine fecal flotation, and yet, in my experience, is common enough a parasite that you want to make sure that your pet doesn't have it, especially if they have diarrhea. Tapeworms are really tough to diagnose because, as I mentioned earlier, they leave the body in segments, and in order to see eggs on a fecal floatation, one of those segments would have to rupture and release the eggs, which doesn't happen very often.

OK, finally, on to treatment. The great news is that most pets today are on some form of flea heartworm and tick control, which has medication that will definitely kill fleas, the number one cause of tapeworms and will also get roundworms and hookworms. You can speak to your veterinarian about those products, as some of them will also get whipworms. Treating coccidia involves a special antibiotic which your veterinarian will prescribe if your pet's fecal is positive for Coccidia or if your pet has diarrhea and has been diagnosed with Coccidia. Giardia is also easy to treat with a special medication called Fenbendazole.

And finally, I want to touch on the three reasons why I recommend that you test your pet stool every six to twelve months. Number one, there are a lot of parasites out there. Eggs from most worms can survive in harsh climates, both cold and hot, so they're always viable and ready to infect your pet. Number two, as I mentioned earlier, pets get way closer to doo-doo than we do, which makes them much more prone to ingesting or sniffing in those parasites. And finally, number three pets can harbour parasites for a long time with no clinical signs and then get diarrhea one day. And that's when we diagnose them with parasites. Running a fecal test is a way to prevent that sickness from happening, and prevention is the way of the Pet Wellness Advocate.

Thank you so much for hanging out with me today. Talking about a pretty stinky topic, but I hope you learned a lot. If you have any questions, please send them to [podcast@petwellnessadvocate.com](mailto:podcast@petwellnessadvocate.com). Have your pet's stool tested regularly because our pets deserve our best!

If you're excited to hear more about how you can become a pet wellness advocate, be sure to subscribe so you're notified when a new episode is posted. Thanks for spending time with us today.