

Ask A Vet: Creepy Crawlers Everywhere

Sunday, January 8, 2017

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

I know dogs and cats can get fleas and ticks, but are there similar parasites that can affect my farm animals?

Sincerely, Itchy cow owner

Dear Itchy,

Absolutely there are ectoparasites (parasites that live on the outside of your animal) that can affect your farm animals. There are too many to discuss in great detail, but we'll cover two of the major ones.

Mites are a common parasite on many species. Most animals (including you) have thousands of mites living in your skin, but they rarely cause a problem. One of the main mites that can cause significant disease is the Sarcoptic mite, but you will probably know it by the name Scabies. Sarcoptic mites burrow under the outer surface of the skin and cause severe itching. You may notice that your animals are rubbing against fence posts or the side of the barn, and that they have red, scaly skin. These are of particular importance because the mites are not species specific and can be transmitted to cats, dogs, horses, other farm animals, or even you! Treatment is not terribly costly, but it can be difficult to remove all of the mites from all of the animals. The other two mites I'll mention are the Chorioptic and Psoroptic mange mites. They can be called scab mites or scaly mites. They can cause enough damage to the skin in sheep that the wool is severely damaged. They can also damage the skin on a cow's udder which will prevent the cows from being willingly milked. Additionally, dealing with the mange can cause animals to not grow well and fall ill to other secondary bacterial infections. Mites are microscopic and are often diagnosed by the veterinarian by performing a skin scraping and looking at them under the microscope.

Lice are another category of ectoparasites that are commonly seen in many species. Lice fortunately are species specific, so you do not have to worry about catching lice from any farm animals. Likewise, if your child has brought home head lice from school, they cannot be transmitted to any of your animals. Lice are broken down into two major categories: chewing or sucking. Chewing lice live on the hair shafts and will crawl down to the skin and bite or chew out a piece of skin to feed on. This can cause severe itching and scratching at the sites. Enough damage can be done to the skin that it leads

to secondary bacterial infections and poor growth. Sucking lice still live on the hair shafts, but instead of taking bites out of the skin, they insert a “straw-like” mouthpiece into the animal’s skin and suck out blood. This can cause the animal to itch and cause damage to the skin/wool/hide. If the animal is infested with enough lice, they can cause the animal to become anemic (not enough blood in circulation). Fortunately, many conventional dewormers and pour-ons are effective treatment for lice. Frequently, if you are suspicious of lice, you can examine the animal’s coat and see these small creatures crawling around on the hair shafts.

Fleas and ticks can also affect farm animals, but usually are not as significant. Many tick species, however, can carry blood-borne parasites that can cause severe diseases such as Lyme disease, Anaplasmosis, Ehrlichia, etc.

As always, for questions on these or other ectoparasites, and if they could be affecting your herd or flock, please contact your regular veterinarian.

-Dr. Jason Heitzman