

Ask A Vet: Me, Worry? Wait What are Those?

Sunday, March 27, 2016

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

My dog loves spending time outside, and we do everything we can to take care of him. Recently, when he had a bowel movement, we noticed that there were small white things that looked like rice crawling around his back end and on the feces. We have him on a heartworm medication which is supposed to stop intestinal parasites, so it cannot be worms. Right?

-Worried of our Wormy Dog

Dear Worried,

What you are seeing sounds like it could be tapeworm segments. These segments are packets of eggs that have been passed by the adult tapeworm. The life cycle of the tapeworm is very important to understanding how they are spread, and can be prevented. The segments you were observing are called proglottids. They have the ability to move around before drying out and releasing the eggs into the environment. From there, it depends on the species of tapeworm to determine what the next step is. For the most common tapeworm of dogs and cats, a flea larva (intermediate host) must eat one of those eggs. The tapeworm egg hatches inside of the flea larva and matures. Once the flea molts into an adult, it jumps onto a dog or cat to feed. If the dog or cat feels the bite of the flea, they can chew on the area and accidentally eat the flea. After the flea's body is digested within the dog or cat (final host), the tapeworm is now free to mature into an adult. The tapeworm grows a head (called a scolex) and then after absorbing nutrition from the dog, it will make progottids to continue the life cycle. The other most common tapeworm is caused by a cat or dog eating mice or rats instead of fleas. While humans can get both of these tapeworms, it is important to note that they are not directly contagious. Tapeworms must go through this specific life cycle in order to infect any host. Because of this fact, we can help to prevent tapeworms by preventing exposure to the intermediate host. First and foremost is flea prevention. If your dog or cat is on persistent flea preventatives, your pet has a very small risk of being infected by tapeworms. Restriction to mice and rats, if possible, is the other main way to prevent tapeworm infections. With many outdoor cats and dogs roaming in pastures or on farms, this can be difficult. Tapeworms are different from other intestinal parasites, so therefore not prevented by most heartworm medications. If your dog is not on a monthly preventative against tapeworms, we can remove these parasites with a simple oral medication. The best thing is to talk to your veterinarian about tapeworms, and to use a regular preventative if your dog or cat is at risk for picking up this parasite.

-Dr. Jason Heitzman