

Ask A Vet: Tick Time!

Sunday, May 11, 2014

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

Last year I found several ticks on my dog starting in the early spring. I put some stuff I got at the vet on him but still saw a couple ticks during the summer and fall. This has never happened before at my house. What is the deal with these ticks and what else can I do to prevent them?

Dear Reader,

You are justified in your concern with these clingy creatures on your property. Across the country, ticks and the diseases they spread are on the rise. Aside from being gross, they can be downright dangerous to you and your pets. Diseases spread by ticks such as Lyme's and Ehrlichia can be devastating, not to mention difficult and expensive to treat. So why are we seeing more ticks? The truth is probably a combination of things. Deer and Wild Turkeys are important hosts in the tick's life cycle and these animals are as numerous as ever in most areas of the country. Combine this with the fact that more and more people are wanting to live in rural settings where animals like deer and turkeys roam their backyards, and you have a perfect recipe for increases tick encounters.

In our particular area we usually are dealing with Brown Dog Ticks, American Dog Ticks, and Deer Ticks. All three species can spread disease to your dog. The Brown Dog Tick is probably the most common, but recently Deer Ticks have become more prevalent. Ticks have a two year life span and a three stage life cycle consisting of larvae, nymph, and adult. Each stage requires a host and blood meal to move on to the next stage of the life cycle. If they do not find a host in the fall they can even survive through the winter.

So what can we do about them? Treating your property or kennel area is one important thing to eliminate ticks from the areas your dog most often frequents. There are several sprays available that are safe for your pet and the environment. Probably the most important aspect is treating your pet with an anti-tick medication. These meds wont always kill or repel ticks on the spot, but the good ones should prevent ticks from embedding in your pet and spreading disease. They are available as monthly tablets, topicals, or even collars that release the medication into your pet through skin contact. I recommend you discuss the options with your veterinarian to see which may fit your situation best. Finally, examining your dog regularly for ticks and removing them as soon as possible is very important. The longer a tick is attached to your dog the more likely it can spread disease. All you need to remove a tick is some rubbing alcohol and a good pair of tweezers. Apply the alcohol to the tick, then use the tweezers to grasp the tick as close to your dogs skin as possible. Slowly pull the tick straight out trying not to leave the ticks head embedded in your dogs skin. If your dog has been bitten, watch for signs of illness and infection at the bite site. Signs of tick born disease can vary, but often include fever, joint soreness, or neurologic symptoms. If there is any question, it is best to contact your veterinarian as these diseases are best treated early. It has been a long winter, but spring is coming and so are the ticks.

-Dr. Justin Sellon