

Ask A Vet: Trouble With Ticks

Sunday, April 26, 2015

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

With the warming temperatures, our dogs have been spending more time outside and running in the woods. We have them on a heartworm preventative that also takes care of fleas, but do we need to worry about ticks? Why won't the flea preventative work on the dog to stop ticks?

Dear Worried Pet Owner,

Those are very good questions for this time of year. Yes, ticks are of major concern. Ticks are second only to mosquitoes for spreading infectious diseases. Ticks are actually arthropods, not insects; meaning they are more closely related to spiders and mites than fleas, ants, or other insects. This can present a problem when trying to prevent them from attaching to your dog. There are many medications which are effective against insects, but not for ticks. There are several safe and effective products that are available. Discuss your needs for the various products with your veterinarian.

As mentioned before, ticks are responsible for spreading many infectious diseases to humans and animals. When a tick attaches, it buries its head into the skin and secretes a concrete-like substance to hold itself there while feeding. Once secured, it will suck blood from its victim. It can take several days for it to become fully engorged, at which time it will detach and crawl away to either molt, breed, or lay eggs (depending on life stage and either male or female). Once a tick is attached for approximately 24-48 hours, if it is carrying a disease, it will transmit the disease to the new host. Most people are familiar with Lyme disease. This bacterial infection is carried most frequently by the Ixodes or Deer tick. Signs and symptoms of this disease are quite varied, but most frequently people describe joint pain, joint swelling, and shifting leg lameness. A second common disease is called Ehrlichia. This disease is spread by the Rhipicephalus or Brown Dog Tick. The most common signs reported are lameness/stiffness, lack of appetite, depression, or swelling of legs. This disease can progress rapidly and lead to damage to your pet's blood cells. In severe cases, animals need blood transfusions or hospitalization for many days. A third common disease (though not frequently in this area) is Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever. This infection is caused by the Dermacentor or American Dog Tick. The disease is characterized by a spreading rash and a high fever.

Depending on where you live in the country, the risk for various tick-borne illnesses can increase or decrease. Check your pets and yourself after going for walks in the woods or spending time walking in tall grass. If you find a tick on your pet, contact your veterinarian for the best way to remove it. Use regular preventative if your dog is in an at risk area.

-Dr. Jason Heitzman