

Ask A Vet: Ugly Bug

Sunday, April 30, 2017

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

I saw this video online of a tiny kitten with a huge bug burrowed into its face - yuck! What was that, and how do I keep my precious kitty safe?

-A Concerned Cat Mom

Dear Concerned,

It is quite possible that what you saw in that video is called a Cuterebra. Cuterebra is the scientific name of the North American botfly. Twenty-six species of Cuterebra live in the U.S. and Canada. They are also found in Mexico and the neo-tropical regions. Cuterebra larvae develop in the tissues of animal hosts, and during this phase of their life cycle, they are often called 'warbles'. The adult botfly lays its eggs near or in the opening of rodent and rabbit burrows. After hatching, this larvae, which typically infect rodents and rabbits, enters the host's body through an opening like the nose or mouth or through a skin wound. After several days, they travel to the tissues beneath the skin where they encyst and continue their development. Cuterebra do not purposefully infest your cat! Cats are accidental hosts of Cuterebra larvae. They are most commonly infected when they are hunting rodents or rabbits and come across the botfly larvae near the opening to a rodent's burrow. For this reason, most cases of warbles in cats occur around the head and neck. If the current infection is in the early stages, you might notice no signs at all! Most cases of warbles do not become noticeable until the larva grows large enough and becomes a swelling that is seen or can be felt beneath the skin. You may see what is often called a "breathing" hole in the skin over the warble. The hole starts out very small and gets bigger when the warble has fully matured and is about to leave the skin. Sometimes, nothing is noticed until after the larva has left the host and the empty cyst becomes infected.

In many cases, the secondary bacterial infection that develops in the empty cyst causes more damage to the host than the primary infection with the Cuterebra warbles. Many accidental feline hosts will develop an abscess (pocket of pus) or skin infection at the infection site after the current larvae has left the skin. When only one or two larvae are involved, the prognosis is very good for complete resolution of the problem and few permanent side effects occur. The prognosis is worse if a cat is infected with multiple warbles or if a warble migrates through a nerve or other sensitive tissue or organ. Treatment will involve careful removal of the warble, cleansing of the infected tissues and likely a round of antibiotics for secondary infections. What can you do to prevent your cat from becoming a host for this not fly larvae? Since the fly is a common fly in North America, the best prevention is to keep your cat from hunting rodents. If this is impossible and if you live in an area with numerous rodents, rabbits or other small mammals, you should regularly scan your cat for any swellings or any signs of warbles. The earlier a warble is removed, the less likely the chance of permanent or serious damage to your cat. Please contact your local veterinarian if you think your cat might be infected with a bit fly larvae.

-Dr. Ashley Vander Wey