PARASITES

EXTERNAL PARASITES

FLEAS
Fleas are rather uncommon in Montana, due to our cool, dry climate. If your dog has fleas, he might be very itchy. You can usually see the tiny, flat, reddish-brown hopping bugs, and crumbly, reddish-brown excrement sometimes called “flea dirt” over your dog’s hips. It is vital to remember that both the environment and the pet must be treated in order to break the flea life cycle.

MITES
Several different mites can live on or in your dog’s skin (including in the ear canal). Most are very small, and can be seen only with magnification. Some are contagious to people and others are not. Most respond well to either oral medication or medicated baths.

TICKS
Ticks are common in Montana. They are usually quite obvious, especially the engorged females. Frequent “tick checks” are a must, especially if your dog goes into the mountains with you. Tick collars or sprays can be very effective. The prompt and thorough removal of ticks may also prevent tick-borne diseases. We recommend that you use latex gloves when removing a tick to prevent your accidental exposure to these diseases as well.

LICE
Lice are fairly rare in Montana, but are more commonly seen in young puppies that have been living with lots of other dogs. They can be seen with the naked eye (and also often their eggs, or “nits”) and can be treated with medicated baths. Lice are very species-specific, so dog lice can only infect dogs.

RINGWORM
Ringworm is not a worm – it is a fungal infection similar to athlete’s foot. Your dog’s veterinarian will prescribe topical or oral medication to kill the fungus. Ringworm can spread to people from dogs and cats.

INTERNAL PARASITES

HEARTWORM
Mosquitoes spread this disease from dog to dog. This disease can be life threatening; even treating it can be risky. Fortunately, it is easy to prevent heartworm disease with a once-a-month pill. All dogs should have an annual blood test for heartworms. (Be sure to discuss your dog’s individual risk with your veterinarian.)

The following parasites live in the intestinal tract.
They primarily cause soft stool or diarrhea and sometimes weight loss in dogs, although infected dogs may show no signs of illness at all. This is why we recommend annual microscopic fecal exams. The most important thing you can do to prevent animal parasites from threatening your family's health is to clean up animal waste daily.

ROUNDWORMS
These worms can be transmitted from the mother to the puppies before they are even born. Large numbers of roundworm can block a dog's intestine. Humans (primarily young ones with less-than-perfect hand washing habits) can ingest microscopic eggs after playing in contaminated soil. The eggs mature into larva, which migrate bizarrely through the body, sometimes causing nervous system signs or even blindness.

HOOKWORMS
Ingestion of the eggs of these worms can result in larval migration in people, but they can also be picked up directly through the skin, which causes intensely itchy lesions. A severe hookworm infection can make a dog anemic.

TAPEWORMS
These parasites reproduce by shedding off segments of their body, which then can be seen on the hair under your dog's tail. The segments are short and wiggly at first, and dry to look like rice grains. Dogs get tapeworms by ingesting fleas, usually by hunting rodents or prairie dogs. Tapeworms are easily eliminated with either a shot or a pill. These parasites are not transmitted directly to people.

GIARDIA
Giardia is a very common parasite in Montana. The organisms are prevalent in streams, ponds and standing water, so dogs that hike or swim are at higher risk. Giardia can be difficult to get rid of because it lives deep within the intestine and reinfection is common. Always have a post-treatment fecal sample checked if your dog has been diagnosed with giardia. Current research suggests that direct transmission from dogs to people does not occur with giardia.

COCCIDIA
These microscopic organisms are more frequently seen in puppies, and can be difficult to treat successfully. The medication for coccidian paralyzes the parasites, which are then removed from the intestine by simple mechanical action. A recheck fecal should be done to assess the effectiveness of treatment.