Points on Pets: Roundworm can cause problems in humans as well as dogs

by R.G._Elmor_DVM

Q: Our family was alarmed when we recently heard that a friend's little boy might lose the sight in his left eye because of a roundworm infection, which he probably got from playing with his puppy. We did not realize all the risks involved in owning a puppy.

Are roundworms commonly diagnosed in puppies?

A: Diagnosing roundworms in puppies is common. Puppies can get infected with roundworms in several ways, including before birth. In other words, puppies can become infected from their mothers while still being carried in the uterus. It also happens when puppies ingest contaminated milk as well as living in contaminated environments.

The life cycle of the roundworm is interesting. After a roundworm egg is ingested, it develops into a larva in the dog's intestines. Roundworm larvae eventually migrate out of the intestines, burrow through the liver and end up in the lungs of the infected dog. The roundworm larvae in the lungs then are coughed up into the oral cavity after they get swallowed. The swallowed larvae develop into adult roundworms in the dog's intestines. These adults shed eggs, which are passed into the environment when the dog defecates. The development of new larvae and the migration through the dog is repeated when another dog ingests the contaminated stool from the first dog.

Roundworms are zoonotic, meaning that they can infect humans. Unfortunately, when children ingest stools from dogs, contaminated dirt or sand where infected dogs have defecated, the development of larvae can occur within them. Occasionally these larvae migrate to the retina and cause blindness in the affected eye.

This is one reason why it is so important to teach children to wash their hands after playing outside and to keep their hands out of their mouths. It is also essential to teach children that it is not acceptable to allow a dog to lick them in the face.

Prevention of roundworms in dogs includes having their stool samples checked for roundworm eggs by a veterinarian, treatment if roundworm infections are diagnosed and diligently picking up and disposing of stools as soon as deposited on the ground.

The fear of roundworms should not keep anyone from enjoying the companionship of their dog; however, everyone should have their dogs checked for roundworms regularly by their veterinarian.

Q: We were surprised when our veterinarian told us that our dog needs dental work. We have never had dental work done on any of our previous dogs.

Do dogs get cavities as humans do? I have never heard of a dog having a filling.

A: While it is relatively rare, it is possible for dogs to have dental cavities. In fact, veterinary dentists do root canal procedures on dogs. Dental diseases, including infections of the gums, can lead to serious secondary diseases affecting a dog's major body organs.

Every dog should have an annual physical examination, including a thorough examination of its teeth and gums. Routine dentist visits can prevent painful dental problems as the dog ages, which can actually prolong its life by several years.

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