

Points on Pets: Signs of giardia fever

by R.G._Elmor_DVM

Q. Is giardia a problem in dogs? Because we camp a lot in the western United States we are constantly concerned about our children and dogs getting giardia from the streams and small lakes near our campsites. We use commercial filters or use iodine tablets to purify our drinking water. However, we cannot prevent our dogs from drinking out of the streams and lakes. Should we be concerned? Fortunately, neither our dogs nor our children have been ill because of drinking infected water so far.

A. Although dogs and cats are susceptible to being infected by giardia, most do not show external signs of the disease. Pets often become infected with giardia by drinking out of contaminated streams and lakes. Because of this, the disease is often referred to as beaver fever.

A mild to severe diarrhea is usually seen in those dogs and cats that do exhibit signs of infection with giardia. Fortunately, most of these cases are self-limiting. That is, the clinical signs of the disease disappear without any treatment. However, dogs and cats with chronic giardia infections often lose weight and experience periods of vomiting and diarrhea. This, of course, can lead to severe dehydration.

Some animals become asymptomatic carriers of giardia. This means that these animals shed the causative protozoan parasite in their feces without showing any external clinical signs of the disease. Because shedding of the parasite is sometimes intermittent, several stool samples over a period of time must be examined to determine whether or not an animal is actually infected. Your veterinarian can give you advice about how to prevent this important disease in your dog. Because giardia infections can be transmitted from animals to people, it is important to regularly pick up stools and properly dispose of them.

Q. Is it possible for a veterinarian to spay a dog while she is in season? Our veterinarian's receptionist will not schedule our dog for surgery until she is out of season. We do not want puppies and want to end this situation as soon as possible. We are tired of the mess and the need to constantly watch our dog while she is outside. What can we do?

A. Most veterinarians do not like to spay dogs while they are in season or in estrus. It is normal for a dog that is in estrus to have an enlarged uterus and enlarged arteries going to the uterus. This, of course, increases the chances that the dog might have excessive hemorrhaging during or after the surgery. Because of this, special precautions must be taken. This in turn increases the costs for doing the surgery. Most importantly, however, most veterinarians simply believe that the increased risks for the dog are not warranted.

You should accept your veterinarian's advice and have your dog spayed as soon as it is safe to do so. It cannot be overemphasized that all owners should have their intact dogs spayed as soon as possible if puppies are not desired. Spaying dogs not only greatly decreases the number of unwanted puppies, but generally make dogs much more enjoyable pets.

Write to Pets, P.O. Box 120190, San Diego, CA 92112-0190. Only questions of general interest will be answered in this column.

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