

## TAPEWORMS

Tapeworms are common intestinal parasites of dogs and cats. While there are several types of tapeworms that can infect dogs and cats, by far the most common one is called *Dipylidium caninum*. It is a segmented worm that lives in the intestines and can grow to 6 inches long or more. However, you rarely see the entire worm. Each small segment breaks off of the end of the worm and then passes out in the feces. You may see the segments in the bowel movement, on the fur around the anus, or on your pet's bedding. When fresh they are about 1/4 to 1/2 inch long, white and may stretch and shrink. When dried they look like a grain of brown rice or a sesame seed. Each segment contains packets of eggs. These tapeworms are rarely found on a fecal exam at the veterinarian because the veterinarian is looking for eggs in the fecal sample and unless a segment happens to be in the sample or is crushed and the eggs are released from the segment, the eggs will not be found in the fecal exam.

### *The Life Cycle*

After the segments pass out of your pet's intestines, the segments dry up in the environment. Flea eggs in the environment hatch into flea larvae. The flea larvae then eat the tapeworm segments and eggs. The tapeworm eggs develop in the flea as the flea larvae develops into a flea pupae and then to an adult flea. When the adult flea is swallowed by your dog or cat during licking or chewing, the tapeworm stage in the flea is released into the dog or cat's intestine and continues its development into an adult tapeworm and the cycle begins all over again.

Many pet owners, when they find tapeworm segments, insist that their pet does not have fleas. But if your pet is infected with *Dipylidium caninum*, your pet had at least one flea at some time in the past. The only way your pet can be infected by this tapeworm is by eating an infected flea. Part of the life cycle of the tapeworm must go through the flea.

### *Symptoms*

Tapeworms do not usually cause significant problems for your pet. However, they can cause some

minor intestinal upset and may rob some nutrients from your pet, and are not aesthetically pleasing to pet owners.

### *Treatment*

Fortunately, treating tapeworms is easy. In most cases one dose is effective to rid the body of this parasite, either as pills or by injection. Some veterinarians recommend retreating in 2-3 weeks. However, we recommend one treatment and then retreatment as needed. The killed tapeworms are generally digested and not likely to be seen in the stool.

You will likely only see segments now and then. So, if you see segments once, you should have your pet treated, as you may not see another segment for several days or weeks. After treatment your pet can become reinfected at any time as long as there is potential flea exposure. So multiple treatments may be necessary until any flea problem is corrected.

### *Tapeworms and Humans*

Theoretically, *Dipylidium* can infect humans if an infected flea is swallowed by a human. Most human cases are in children, but those cases are rare.

### *Other Tapeworms*

The other type of tapeworm is called *Taenia sp.* This type is spread by your pet eating raw carcasses of other animals such as mice, rabbits, deer, sheep, cattle, etc. that have the intermediate form of the tapeworm in their bodies which they get while grazing or eating where the tapeworm eggs are located. In this area this is much less common than the flea tapeworm. However, the same drug treats both types of tapeworms.

### *Conclusion*

So, remember, flea control is essential for tapeworm control. If you don't control fleas, you can't control tapeworms!