

Tapeworms

- Tapeworms are long, flat, parasitic worms that live in the intestines of dogs and cats.
- Pets generally become infected by ingesting fleas that contain tapeworm larvae during grooming.
- Pets may also become infected by eating prey that is infected with tapeworm larvae.
- Most tapeworm infections do not cause illness in pets.
- People can get tapeworm infections by accidentally ingesting an infected flea or, in rare cases, by consuming tapeworm eggs.
- The infection is generally diagnosed by finding tapeworm segments around the pet's anus, in the pet's bedding, or in the pet's feces.
- There are several medications that are effective at eliminating tapeworm infections.
- Flea control is important to help prevent the pet from becoming reinfected.

What Are Tapeworms?

Tapeworms are long, flat, parasitic worms that live in the intestines of dogs and cats. Several species of tapeworms can infect pets. Most have a head that attaches to the intestinal wall and a series of segments, called *proglottids*, that make up the worm's body. An adult tapeworm can reach 6 inches or more in length and has the appearance of a white piece of tape or ribbon.

How Do Pets Become Infected With Tapeworms?

Tapeworm segments detach from the end of the adult tapeworm and are shed in the pet's feces. Each segment contains numerous tapeworm eggs. Once in the environment, the segments break open, releasing the eggs, which eventually develop into tapeworm larvae.

The most common tapeworm found in dogs and cats is associated with fleas. Developing flea larvae in the environment eat the tapeworm larvae, and pets become infected when they ingest an infected flea during grooming.

Pets can become infected with another type of tapeworm when they hunt and eat prey, such as a bird, rodent, or reptile, that has eaten the tapeworm larvae.

What Are the Signs of a Tapeworm Infection?

Dogs and cats generally don't become sick from a tapeworm infection. But rarely, a large infestation may cause weight loss or an intestinal blockage.

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Owners may become aware that their pet has tapeworms by finding tapeworm segments stuck to the fur around the pet's anus, in the pet's bedding, or in the pet's feces. When fresh, these segments are white or cream-colored, can move, and have the appearance of grains of rice. As they dry, they look more like sesame seeds. Occasionally, pets may experience irritation or itchiness around the anus from passing the tapeworm segments.

Can People Get Tapeworms From Their Pets?

Human infections are rare and usually occur when people inadvertently consume an infected flea. Most cases involve children, and tapeworm segments may be found around the anus or in bowel movements. The tapeworm infection can be eliminated with an effective antiparasite medication.

In isolated cases, people may become infected by accidentally eating some types of tapeworm eggs. The ingested tapeworm larvae form cysts, which may require drainage, surgical removal, or medication.

How Are Tapeworm Infections Diagnosed?

Tapeworm eggs may be difficult to detect on a routine veterinary fecal exam. In most cases, the eggs are

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contained within the tapeworm segments, and unless the segments have broken open, they may not appear on a fecal exam.

Infections are usually diagnosed by finding tapeworm segments around the pet's anus or in the pet's feces.

How Is an Infection Treated?

Several medications are effective at eliminating tapeworm infections. At the same time, it is important to treat and control any flea infestation on the pet

or in the environment. As long as the pet is exposed to fleas, he or she is likely to become reinfected with tapeworms.

How Can I Protect my Pet From Tapeworm Infections?

Monthly flea prevention is an important way to help prevent your pet from becoming infected. You should also discourage pets from hunting and eating prey by keeping cats indoors and dogs on a leash when outside.