

# Exotic Pet Fecal Testing

- Fecal testing is the recommended method for diagnosing gastrointestinal (GI) parasite infections.
- GI parasites can cause serious illness in exotic pets.
- Your veterinarian can recommend medications to treat most GI parasites.
- Your veterinarian can recommend a schedule for checkups and fecal testing that can help protect your exotic pet from dangerous GI parasites.

## What Are Gastrointestinal Parasites?

Gastrointestinal (GI) parasites include any parasites that live in the digestive tract of a host. A variety of GI parasites affect exotic pets such as rabbits, rats, mice, gerbils, hamsters, and guinea pigs. The most common GI parasites in these pets are pinworms, tapeworms, *Giardia*, and coccidia. Not every type of parasite affects all species of exotic pets. Your veterinarian can tell you which of these GI parasites can infect your pet:

- **Pinworms:** Adult pinworms are sometimes visible in the feces of infected pets. These parasites may not cause any clinical signs but can cause poor body condition. Deaths have been reported in some rabbits infected with pinworms.
- **Tapeworms:** Heavy tapeworm infections can cause diarrhea and weight loss in exotic pets, but some infected pets don't show clinical signs.
- **Giardia:** *Giardia* is a single-celled GI parasite. In rats and mice, it can cause abdominal distention (swelling) and diarrhea.
- **Coccidia:** Coccidia are microscopic GI parasites. One type of coccidia parasite can cause liver damage and death in rabbits. Coccidia can remain in the environment for months, so cleaning a contaminated area helps prevent disease spread and reinfection.

## How Do Rabbits and Rodents Become Infected With Gastrointestinal Parasites?

In most cases, eggs or infective stages of GI parasites are shed in fecal material. Once parasites are in the

environment, other pets can be exposed through direct contact with feces or exposure to fecal-contaminated food, water, or bedding. Some GI parasites can live in the environment for a long time, so keeping your pet's habitat clean can help reduce the risk of infection.

Pinworm eggs are light and can sometimes be carried on the air. Disinfecting your pet's living area is a good way to help prevent spread of this parasite.

Tapeworms are slightly different in that they can be transmitted indirectly when a pet consumes a beetle, cockroach, flea, or other insect that is infected with the parasite. The immature stage of the tapeworm lives inside the insect. If your pet eats an infected insect, the tapeworm inside the insect can hatch inside your pet and continue its lifecycle. Keeping fleas and other insects away from your pet's living area can help reduce the risk of exposure to tapeworms.

Your veterinarian can recommend a schedule for checkups and fecal testing that can help protect your exotic pet from dangerous GI parasites.

## What Are the Clinical Signs of Gastrointestinal Parasites?

Diarrhea, poor coat quality, lethargy (tiredness), and weight loss can be among the clinical signs of GI parasite infection in rodents and rabbits. However, many infected pets don't show any clinical signs at all. The best way to tell if your pet is infected is to schedule an examination with your veterinarian and have your pet tested for parasites.

## How Is Fecal Testing Performed?

Your veterinarian can begin a fecal analysis by examining the appearance of your pet's fecal material. If the stools are softer than normal or discolored,

this can indicate a problem. Your veterinarian may recommend performing more than one type of fecal test. The most common types of fecal analysis are the following:

- **Direct fecal smear:** In this test, a small amount of stool is placed on a microscope slide, mixed with a very small amount of water or saline, and examined under a microscope. Parasite eggs and single-celled parasites can sometimes be identified using this method.
- **Fecal flotation:** In this test, a sample of stool is placed in a small tubular container and mixed with a small amount of a special solution. Mixing causes the parasite eggs to float to the top of the solution. A clean microscope slide is placed on the rim of the container to collect the eggs, which your veterinarian can see under the microscope.

Fecal testing can detect GI parasites in many cases, but your veterinarian may recommend additional tests to help confirm a diagnosis. Even if testing doesn't confirm parasites, your veterinarian may recommend treatment as a precaution. This is not harmful for your pet.

### Why Is Fecal Testing Important For My Pet?

In many cases, pets infected with GI parasites don't exhibit clinical signs. That means the only way to tell if a pet is infected is to perform fecal testing periodically to screen for parasites.

Your veterinarian can recommend a schedule for checkups and fecal testing that can help protect your exotic pet from these dangerous parasites. Fecal testing is also important because some parasites, such as a type of tapeworm in guinea pigs, can be transmitted to humans. Eliminating these parasites helps protect your pet and your family.