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WHIPWORMS IN DOGS

Whipworms are intestinal parasites of the dog. They parasitize the lower intestine (cecum and colon) and cause signs related to intestinal irritation. Infection with whipworms can be significant because they are one of the more pathogenic intestinal parasites found in the dog.

They are small, about 1/4" (45 to 75 mm) long, and have a characteristic “whip” or “lash” at one end. After the worm burrows into the intestine, it is this “whip” that causes damage to the lining of the bowel. The tip of the “lash” is able to slash and shred tissue. The worm then feeds on the blood and damaged lining of the intestine.

Contributing Factors

A dog is more likely to become infected whipworms if it resides in an environment contaminated with whipworm eggs. The eggs are very resistant to destruction and can remain viable (infective) in the soil for months or even years.

Prevalence

The canine whipworm is found throughout North America, although it is most common in the eastern and southern United States. In other countries, different species of whipworms can exist.

Causes/Transmission

Whipworms pass microscopic eggs in the stool, which must be swallowed to infect the dog. Once the eggs mature into adult worms, eggs are passed in the dog’s stool and can infect another dog.

Clinical Signs

The most significant clinical sign of whipworm infection is bloody and/or mucoid (mucous) stool. Overt diarrhea may or may not be present. The dog may exhibit pain during defecation and attempt frequent bowel movements. In dogs with chronic whipworm infection, debilitation may develop and the dog will lose weight and possibly become anemic.

Diagnosis

Whipworm infection is diagnosed by finding the characteristic eggs during a microscopic examination of the stool. Several samples may be required because these parasites pass small numbers of eggs on an irregular basis. Any dog with chronic diarrhea can be reasonably suspected to have whipworms, regardless of several negative stool examinations. It is advisable to treat for whipworms based on assumption of infection when chronic or refractory diarrhea is present. Response to treatment is an indication that whipworms were present but could not be detected on fecal examination.

Treatment and Prevention

Several available drugs are very effective against whipworms. Two treatments are needed at a 3-4 week interval. Since reinfection is such a problem, it is advisable to treat again every 3-4 months or to put the dog on a heartworm preventive product that also prevents hookworms. Whipworms are not nearly as common now because of widespread use of the heartworm preventives that help to control whipworms. Prompt removal of all feces is essential-especially in yards, playgrounds, and public parks. A solution of 50% household bleach and 50% water can be used to treat the yard as well as a kennel area.

Prognosis

The prognosis for full recovery is good if the entire course of treatment is completed. In contaminated environments, reinfection may occur.

Transmission to Humans

There is a very small risk of human infection by canine whipworms. Eggs of this parasite have occasionally been observed in stool samples of humans. These should be noted as rare events, however. The overall health risk to humans is considered very small.