

WHAT ARE TAPEWORMS?

The most common tapeworm of dogs and cats is called *Dipylidium caninum*. This parasite attaches to the small intestinal wall by hook-like mouthparts. Adult tapeworms may reach 8 inches (20 cm) in length. The adult worm is actually made up of many small segments about 1/8 inch (3 mm) long. As the tail end of the worm matures, the last segments break off and pass into the stool. Occasionally, the mobile segments can be seen crawling near the anus or on the surface of a fresh bowel movement. When dry, these segments look like grains of rice and contain tapeworm eggs; the eggs are released into the environment.

How did my pet get tapeworms?

In order for an animal to become infected with the common tapeworm, *Dipylidium*, the pet must swallow a flea that contains tapeworm eggs. This process begins when tapeworm eggs are swallowed by flea larvae (an immature stage of the flea). Contact between flea larvae and tapeworm eggs are thought to occur most frequently in contaminated bedding or carpet. Next, the pet chews or licks its skin as a flea bites; the flea is then swallowed. As the flea is digested within the pet's intestine, the tapeworm hatches and anchors itself to the intestinal lining.

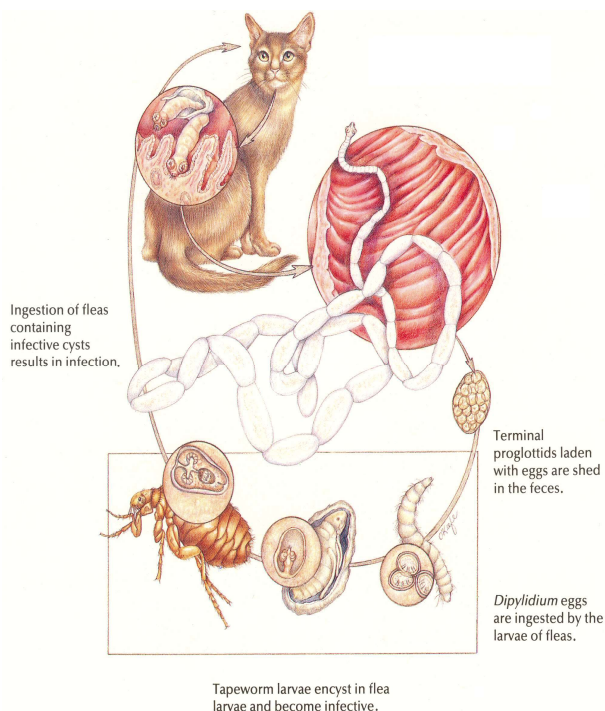
What kind of problems do tapeworms cause?

They may cause debilitation and weight loss when they occur in large numbers. Sometimes, the pet will scoot or drag its anus across the ground or carpet because the segments are irritating to the skin in this area. The adult worm is generally not seen, but the white segments which break away from the tapeworm and pass outside the body rarely fail to get an owner's attention!

Occasionally, a tapeworm will release its attachment in the intestines and move into the stomach. This irritates the stomach, causing the animal to vomit the worm. When this happens, a worm several inches in length will be seen.

How is tapeworm infection diagnosed?

An infection with *Dipylidium* is usually diagnosed when the white, mobile segments are seen crawling on your pet or in the stool. Tapeworms are not usually detected by the routine fecal examination performed by the veterinarian. Because of this, veterinarians depend on the owner to notify them of possible tapeworm infection in the dog.



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How are the tapeworms treated?

Treatment is simple and, fortunately, very effective. A drug which kills tapeworms is given, either orally or by injection. It causes the tapeworm to dissolve within the intestines. Since the worm is usually digested before it passes, it is not visible in your pet's stool.

Control of fleas is very important in the management and prevention of tapeworm infection. Flea control involves treatment of your pet, the indoor environment and the outdoor environment where the pet resides. If the pet lives in a flea-infested environment, reinfection with tapeworms may occur in as little as two weeks. Because the medication which treats tapeworm infection is so effective, return of the tapeworms is almost always due to reinfection from the environment.

Are Dog/Cat tapeworms infectious to people?

Yes, although infection is not common or likely. A flea must be ingested for humans to become infected with the most common tapeworm of pets. Most reported cases have involved children. The most effective way to prevent human infection is through aggressive, thorough flea control. The risk for infection with this tapeworm in humans is quite small but does exist.

What can be done to control tapeworm infection in dogs and to prevent human infection?

1. Effective flea control is important.
2. Prompt deworming should be given when parasites are detected; periodic deworming may be appropriate for pets at high risk for reinfection.