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Feline Tapeworm Infection

Tapeworms are intestinal parasites of cats and dogs. Because they are classified as cestodes, they belong to a different family of worms than hookworms and roundworms (called nematodes). Several types of tapeworms are known to infect cats; *Dipylidium caninum* is by far the most common.

The tapeworm uses its hook-like mouthparts for anchoring to the wall of the small intestine. Eventually, adult tapeworms may reach several inches in length. As the adult matures, individual segments (proglottids) break off from the main body of the tapeworm and pass into the cat's feces.

What cats are likely to get tapeworms ?

Fleas are the intermediate host for the tapeworm. In other words, the tapeworm is unable to complete its life cycle without the presence of fleas in the environment. Regardless of whether the guardian may have seen fleas, the cat must have ingested a flea in order to have tapeworms. Consequently, tapeworms are more common in environments which are heavily infested with fleas. Lice are also reported as intermediate hosts for tapeworms, but they are relatively uncommon parasites of cats.

How do cats get tapeworms?

First, tapeworm eggs must be ingested by flea larvae. Contact between flea larvae and tapeworm eggs is facilitated by contaminated bedding or carpet. Adult fleas do not participate in this part of the tapeworm lifecycle.

Next, the cat chews or licks his skin as a flea bites; the flea is then swallowed. As the flea is digested within the cat's intestine, the tapeworm hatches and anchors itself to the intestinal lining.

What are the clinical signs?

Tapeworms are not particularly harmful to the cat and few clinical signs are attributed to their presence. Usually, the cat is presented because of the guardian's reaction to the presence of the crawling proglottids/segments. Rarely, tapeworms may cause debilitation or weight loss if they are present in large numbers. Also, a cat will occasionally scoot or drag his anus across the ground or carpet due to the anal irritation caused by the proglottids. This behavior is much more common in dogs than cats.

Occasionally, a tapeworm will release its attachment in the intestines and migrate to the stomach. When this happens, the cat may vomit an adult tapeworm several inches in length.



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How are tapeworms diagnosed ?

Most commonly, guardians recognize that the cat has tapeworms and brings this to the attention of the veterinary staff. When terminal segments of the tapeworm break off and pass into the cat's stool, they can be seen crawling on the surface of the feces. These proglottid segments look like grains of cooked white rice. Less commonly, they are seen crawling around the cat's anus. Each of these proglottid capsules contains up to 20 tapeworm eggs.

When these proglottids are released into the environment, they dehydrate and harden; they become quite small and take on a golden hue. Eventually, they break open and release their contents (eggs). Be aware that tapeworms are not readily diagnosed with routine fecal examinations. Because of this, you need to notify your veterinarian when tapeworm segments are found in your cat's stool.

Are tapeworms from my cat a danger to me or my family?

Humans can become infected with tapeworms, although infection is rare because it is established by ingestion of a flea. Most reported cases have involved children. The risk for human infection with *Dipylidium caninum* is quite small but does exist.