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Coccidiosis in Cats & dogs

Coccidiosis is an infection with a one-celled organism; these organisms are classified as protozoa and are called coccidia. Coccidia are not worms; they are microscopic parasites that live within cells of the intestinal lining. Because they live in the intestinal tract and commonly cause diarrhea, they are often confused with worms.

Means of Infection

Oocysts (immature coccidia) are passed in the stool of the cat or dog. They lie in the environment and eventually sporulate (mature) into a more developed oocyst that can infect the cat or dog again. Other cats, dogs, or mice may also become infected. This process can occur in as little as 6 hours, but it usually takes 7-10 days. If the sporulated oocysts are swallowed, they mature in the cat or dog's intestine to complete the life cycle. If the oocysts should be swallowed by a mouse, the cat or dog may also become infected by eating the mouse.

Prevalence

Coccidiosis is a relatively common finding in young kittens and puppies, especially if they are strays or have come from a crowded environment with poor hygiene (pet store, "puppy mill", etc.)

Clinical Signs

Most dogs & cats that are infected with coccidia do not have diarrhea or any other clinical signs. When the eggs (oocysts) are found in the stool of a cat or dog without diarrhea, they are generally considered a transient, insignificant finding. However, in kittens & puppies and debilitated adult cats & dogs, they may cause severe, watery diarrhea, dehydration, abdominal distress, and vomiting. In severe cases, death may occur.

Diagnosis

Coccidiosis is diagnosed by performing a microscopic examination of a stool sample. Since the oocysts are much smaller than the eggs of the intestinal worms, a very careful study must be made. Infection with some of the less common coccidial parasites is diagnosed with additional tests that require specialized laboratory facilities.

Treatment

The most common drug used to eliminate coccidia is a sulfa-type antibiotic. It is given for 10-14 days. The medication or dog is sweet tasting and objection to the taste is usually not a problem. If the sulfa-type drug is not effective, others are available. Additional medication or dog may be needed if diarrhea and dehydration occur.

Reinfection of cats & dogs is common so environmental disinfection is important. The use of chlorine bleach, one cup in a gallon of water, is effective if the surfaces and premises can be safely treated with it.

Transmission to Humans

The most common coccidia found in cat & dogs do not have any effect on humans. However, less common types of coccidia are potentially infectious to humans. One parasite, called *Cryptosporidium*, may be carried by cat or dogs & dogs or dogs and may be transmitted to people. This parasite has also been found in public water supplies in some major cities. Another coccidial organism, *Toxoplasma*, is of particular concern to pregnant women because of the potential to cause birth defects in newborns.

These two coccidial parasites pose a health risk for immunosuppressed humans (i.e., AIDS patients, those taking immune suppressant drugs, cancer patients, the elderly). Good hygiene and proper disposal of cat or dog feces are important in minimizing risk of transmission of all feline parasites to humans. Although there is risk of the cat or dog transmitting these two particular parasites to humans, it does not warrant removing the cat or dog from the household except in very rare instances.