

The Season of the Tick

Insect experts are expecting to see more ticks than usual out and about this year. The unusually mild winter we've had means that there will be more of the little critters around looking for blood. Ticks are very hardy and can survive in temperatures just above freezing. Urban environments can create an "urban heat island effect", providing a warm spot for ticks and insects to survive the winter. A mild winter and early spring also mean that more rodents are around. Rodents serve as hosts for ticks, providing warmth and a food source.

More ticks in our environment means that everyone needs to watch out for them. Ticks seek out people, pets, and wild animals for food. People and pets that spend a lot of time outside are at risk for tick bites, but you don't have to be in the wilderness to encounter these parasites. We've seen a number of ticks already this year on dogs that only spend time in the backyard.

Ticks are often found in tall grass and low shrubs. They typically crawl up the grass blades and do something called questing, looking for a host animal. When an animal comes by the tick will crawl onto the host and migrate upward, finding a warm place on the body to feed. Tick bites can be irritating, but most animals do not even know that they have been bitten. Attached ticks are often found on the scalp of people. Ticks seem to prefer the head, neck, and paws of dogs. Depending on their stage, ticks spend from 7 to 12 days feeding from a host before dropping off.

The CDC reports that ticks are found in every state in the United States. It is also important to recognize that every state has ticks that carry diseases. Lyme disease is the most well-known of tick borne diseases but there are other important diseases that are carried by ticks. These include Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever, anaplasmosis, and ehrlichiosis. Ticks can carry more than one of these diseases at a time.

The signs of most tick-borne diseases are vague. Some people and pets don't have symptoms in the early stages of the disease. Signs that pets may show include lethargy, fever, and joint pain. A rash can be seen at the site of the bite. Tick titers are often used to determine if a pet is infected with a tick-borne disease. These results can be confusing because a test run early on in the disease will be negative, converting to positive several weeks later.

Ticks are also responsible for an unusual disease called tick paralysis. This is not caused by an infection, but is caused by a toxin that is made in the salivary glands of pregnant female ticks. The Rocky Mountain wood tick and American Dog Tick are most commonly associated with tick paralysis in North America. Tick paralysis usually starts with weakness in the back legs, which ascends to the trunk, front legs, and head. This condition can cause difficulty breathing which can be fatal. Unlike the tick-borne infectious diseases, tick paralysis only

continues while the tick is attached. Removal of the tick reverses the signs of paralysis, typically over several hours to days. Tick paralysis can progress rapidly and can be fatal before anyone is aware of the tick's presence.

Everyone has probably heard that the way to remove a tick is to burn it off with a hot match. Other suggestions include applying fingernail polish or petroleum jelly. None of these methods are recommended and could hurt your pet. These methods do not cause the tick to "back out", and they may actually result in the tick releasing more disease-carrying saliva. This could increase the risk of infection. The best way to remove a tick is to grasp it as close to the skin as possible with tweezers. Gently pull the tick's body out with a steady motion. We recommend wearing rubber gloves, and cleaning the skin with soap and water after removal. Dispose of the tick by placing it in alcohol or flushing it down the toilet. If you are worried about removal you can always bring your dog to a veterinarian to have the tick removed. If a tick is found on a pet it is important to check the entire family for ticks as well.

The best way to prevent tick-borne diseases is to use a tick preventative and check your pets frequently for ticks. Most specialists agree that ticks have to feed for 24 hours to transmit disease. "Spot-on" products are effective and easy to use. Amitraz tick collars are another tick prevention option. There are many options available to pet owners today. Veterinarians are a great resource to discuss tick prevention as well as tick borne diseases.

If you have any questions about ticks and your pets call Elk Meadow Animal Hospital at 303-674-7400 or visit www.elkmeadowvet.com.