



Routine worming and flea control for cats and dogs at Acorn House Veterinary Hospital

Cats and dogs in the UK are at risk from endoparasites (worms that live *inside* the pet) and ectoparasites (fleas and ticks that live on the *outside* of the pet). There are many different products available to prevent infection with these parasites, or to treat pets once they have become infected. The parasites can damage pet's skin, digestive system, blood clotting system or lungs. Other parasites may cause no obvious signs of ill health in your pet, but can cause ill health in people who come into contact with the pet or its faeces. Some parasites cause very little damage themselves, but can spread other infections (for example, ticks can carry the Lyme disease infection).

General measures to keep pets and people safe from pet-borne parasites

1. Review the parasite control that you are using for your pet at least every 12 months as part of your pet's annual health check.
2. Cover sandpits in the garden when they are not in use.
3. Do not feed raw food to pets (if raw diets must be fed they should be accredited by the Pet Food Manufacturers Association and frozen at recommended temperatures for recommended durations before purchase).
4. Wash hands regularly and especially after handling faeces or litter trays and before eating.
5. Pick up pet faeces from gardens and litter trays within 12 hours.

DOGS

Worms (endoparasites)

- Puppies should be treated very regularly for worms. Roundworms are the most important type of worms in this age group, but consideration must also be given to tapeworm and lungworm. Different tablet or spot-on products are available and vary slightly in their use, but in most cases, monthly worming is recommended for puppies and kittens during the first year of life. Most often, Acorn House uses Milbemax worming tablets for dogs, a chewable tablet given every month.
- For dogs over 12 months of age, continuing to worm monthly with these products will mean that pets should not develop infestations with roundworm, tapeworm or lungworm. This is particularly important where dogs live alongside vulnerable people (infants and children, immunocompromised people), or live high-risk lifestyles (dogs living outdoors). It is usually a mandatory requirement for working and assistance dogs. The benefit of this approach is that as long as you give the tablet or spot-on every month, you do not need to think about worms any further.

- Of course, the downside of worming your dog every month is that some months, he or she may not have any worms at all and the worming is unnecessary. For adult dogs, it is possible to categorise your dog's risk based on his/her lifestyle using the ESCCCAP guidelines available at <https://www.esccapuk.org.uk/guidelines-uk/>. These guidelines have decision trees that ask you questions about how you feed, house and care for your pet, and what sort of activities he participates in. This will produce an individualised recommendation as to how often your pet should be wormed against the different types of worms and lower risk dogs may be advised to worm only every 3 months. It is important to remember that this is just a risk analysis, not a guarantee – it is *unlikely* that these low risk dogs will pick up worms on the lower frequency worming schedule but it is *not* a guarantee, especially if their lifestyle or behaviour changes over time.
- For low risk dogs with owners that are keen to avoid the use of chemical wormers unless absolutely essential, the ESCCCAP decision trees report that instead of worming every 3 months, you could test your pet to see if they have any worms every 3 months, and only treat them if they do. Acorn House Veterinary Hospital is able to submit blood and faecal samples to Idexx laboratory for the most sensitive, antigen-based testing for roundworms and lungworm. The more traditional way to test for worms is to send faecal samples for flotation testing where the faeces are examined under a microscope – this is less sensitive than the antigen testing (more likely to give a negative result even when worms are present) but it is less expensive. Whichever method is chosen, it is vital to remember that this only tells you about your dog's worm status on the day that you take the sample. Therefore, if you have a negative result and decide not to worm your dog, it is perfectly possible that the very next day he may eat something contaminated with worm eggs and develop a worm infection. This is why the tests must be performed regularly, to check that negative pets stay negative. It means that there is never a guarantee that dogs monitored in this way do not have worms (this is why high risk dogs or those living with high risk people should not follow this route and should just be wormed monthly).

Fleas and ticks (ectoparasites)

- Fleas are a year-round problem, particularly in centrally heated homes. Ticks are more common in spring and early summer but can also be picked up year-round in the UK. In most cases, we recommend that dogs receive a regular preventative treatment against fleas and ticks. Our usual product is Bravecto, a tablet given once every 3 months. Other tablets, spot-ons and collars are available – the Acorn House team will be happy to discuss these in more detail. The benefit of a tablet is that it cannot be washed off – meaning that it keeps working effectively even in dogs that are frequent swimmers or need to be bathed regularly. Tablets also avoid inadvertent exposure of household members to the flea and tick chemicals.

- For low risk dogs (mostly indoor lifestyle, infrequent mixing with other animals, during cold weather), some owners choose not to treat for fleas unless they are actually found on the pet. If you choose to go down this route it is advised that you check your pet regularly for fleas so that you can respond quickly if they pick them up. The best way is to ruffle your pet's fur over a piece of wet, white paper – any flea droppings will sprinkle onto the paper and be visible as red dots. Owners should be aware that once a flea problem has developed within a household, it is likely to take at least 3 months to resolve and will probably require the use of additional treatments such as household sprays and hot washing of bedding.

During the high-risk season for ticks, owners should check their dog after every walk and remove ticks promptly with a “tick hook” before they can transmit any disease.

CATS

Worms (endoparasites)

- Kittens should be treated very regularly for worms. Roundworms are the most important type of worms in this age group, but consideration must also be given to tapeworm and lungworm. Different tablet or spot-on products are available and vary slightly in their use, but in most cases, monthly worming is recommended for puppies and kittens during the first year of life. Most often, Acorn House uses Milbemax worming tablets for kittens, a chewable tablet given every month; or Broadline spot on, a combination wormer, flea and tick treatment.
- For cats over 12 months of age, continuing to worm monthly with these products will mean that pets should not develop infestations with roundworm, tapeworm or lungworm. This is particularly important where cats live alongside vulnerable people (infants and children, immunocompromised people), or live high-risk lifestyles (cats that hunt). The benefit of this approach is that as long as you give the tablet or spot-on every month, you do not need to think about worms any further.
- Of course, the downside of worming your cat every month is that some months, he or she may not have any worms at all and the worming is unnecessary. For adult cats, it is possible to categorise your cat's risk based on his/her lifestyle using the ESCCCAP guidelines available at <https://www.esccapuk.org.uk/guidelines-uk/>. These guidelines have decision trees that ask you questions about how you feed, house and care for your pet, and what sort of activities he participates in. This will produce an individualised recommendation as to how often your pet should be wormed against the different types of worms and lower risk cats may be advised to worm only every 3 months. It is important to remember that this is just a risk analysis, not a guarantee – it is *unlikely* that these low risk cats will pick up worms on the lower frequency worming schedule but it is *not* a guarantee, especially if their lifestyle or behaviour changes over time.
- For low risk cats with owners that are keen to avoid the use of chemical wormers unless absolutely essential, the ESCCCAP decision trees report that instead of worming every 3 months, you could test your pet to see if they have any worms

every 3 months, and only treat them if they do. Acorn House Veterinary Hospital is able to submit blood and faecal samples to Idexx laboratory for the most sensitive, antigen-based testing for roundworms and lungworm. The more traditional way to test for worms is to send faecal samples for flotation testing where the faeces are examined under a microscope – this is less sensitive than the antigen testing (more likely to give a negative result even when worms are present) but it is less expensive. Whichever method is chosen, it is vital to remember that this only tells you about your cat's worm status on the day that you take the sample. Therefore, if you have a negative result and decide not to worm your cat, it is perfectly possible that the very next day he may eat something contaminated with worm eggs and develop a worm infection. This is why the tests must be performed regularly, to check that negative pets stay negative. It means that there is never a guarantee that cats monitored in this way do not have worms (this is why high risk cats or those living with high risk people should not follow this route and should just be wormed monthly).

Fleas and ticks (ectoparasites)

- Fleas are a year-round problem, particularly in centrally heated homes. Ticks are more common in spring and early summer but can also be picked up year-round in the UK. For cats that go outside, we recommend that cats receive a regular preventative treatment against fleas and ticks. This can be Broadline (a spot-on that treats fleas, ticks and worms) or tablets such as Comfortis (fleas only) or Credelio (fleas and ticks), all of which are given monthly.
- For low risk cats (mostly indoor lifestyle, no other pets, during cold weather), some owners choose not to treat for fleas unless they are actually found on the pet. If you choose to go down this route it is advised that you check your pet regularly for fleas so that you can respond quickly if they pick them up. The best way is to ruffle your pet's fur over a piece of wet, white paper – any flea droppings will sprinkle onto the paper and be visible as red dots. Owners should be aware that once a flea problem has developed within a household, it is likely to take at least 3 months to resolve and will probably require the use of additional treatments such as household sprays and hot washing of bedding.

During the high-risk season for ticks, owners should check their cat regularly and remove ticks promptly with a "tick hook" before they can transmit any disease.

March 20