

Pet Health: Ticks



Ticks are tiny parasites that feed on the blood of their hosts and are attracted to animals by warmth, physical contact, and odor. There are soft and hard ticks. Hard ticks are more common, reproduce faster, and tend to cause more problems for domestic animals, including dogs and cats. Tick bites cause irritation to the skin around the area of the bite, itchiness, head-shaking (if the tick is on the face or in the ears), and sometimes paralysis.

Diseases Carried by Ticks

In dogs and cats, ticks can cause fever, appetite loss, pain, lethargy, and depression. The brown dog tick, although not carrier of human disease bacteria, can transmit **canine piroplasmiasis or piro**, which can be fatal.

The American dog or wood tick can carry and transmit **Rocky Mountain spotted fever, tularemia**, and other diseases from animals to people. Dogs are not affected by these diseases, but people can become infected by removing ticks from pets. This tick is widely distributed east of the Rocky Mountains and also occurs in limited areas on the Pacific Coast. Early removal is important since disease bacteria are not transferred until the tick has fed for several hours.

Through toxic secretions caused by feeding, the American dog tick can also cause **paralysis** in dogs and children where ticks attach at the base of the skull or along the spinal column. Once removed, recovery is rapid, usually within eight hours. Sensitized animals can become paralyzed by tick attachment anywhere on the body.

Ticks also transmit Lyme disease. Most transmission occurs in the New England states, primarily by the deer tick—not the American dog tick or the brown dog tick. If you suspect Lyme disease from a tick bite, contact a physician for appropriate blood tests. Lyme disease can also affect dogs. Symptoms, which may take up to five months to appear, include lameness and joint pain.

Symptoms of Ticks

Once ticks latch onto the skin, they can cause severe itchiness in addition to red and inflamed skin. Dogs and cats who are allergic to ticks may have especially severe itch and inflammation symptoms. Pet guardians may also notice ticks once a tick becomes bloated after feeding and is easier to see.

Preventing Ticks

Commercial topical preventatives, which your veterinarian can recommend, are quite effective in managing ticks in companion dogs and cats. Of course, avoiding outdoor areas that harbor ticks substantially reduces the risk of infection. Certain vaccines are available for some diseases caused by tick-borne organisms, such as Lyme's disease.

Removing Ticks

Improper tick removal can lead to skin infections, pain, and exposure to tick diseases. If you find a tick on your pet, follow these safe removal steps.

Pet Health: Ticks *(continued)*

Step 1

Once you have located a tick, grab a pair of tweezers and a container of alcohol. Do not remove the tick with your bare hands! It will expose you to tick bacteria. If you do not have a pair of tweezers, wear gloves or wrap your hands in tissue.

Step 2

Gently grab the tick near the base of the head with the tweezers and gently but firmly pull the tick straight out. You will feel some resistance, and then the tick should start backing out. Do not use oils or matches to get the tick out; these methods are ineffective and can cause the tick to go deeper into the pet's skin.

Step 3

Place the tick in a container of alcohol to kill it. If you are worried about tick-borne diseases, preserve the tick in alcohol so that your veterinarian can identify it.

Step 4

Ticks like to congregate in the same places on dogs and cats. Where there is one tick, there are likely others. Check your pet thoroughly to ensure that you have removed all the ticks.

Step 5

Gently wipe the areas where you removed ticks with warm, soapy water. If the skin looks inflamed or infected, place a small dab of antibiotic cream on the removal site.

Sometimes, instead of removing a tick completely, you will break the tick at the neck. The tick's head will remain in the pet's skin, but this is okay. The pet's body will absorb the head over time. If you can see the head you may try to remove it as you would a splinter.