



Although animals may play unsuspecting host to some 'baddies', a bit of common sense means we shouldn't be afraid to welcome pets into the home.

Love your pets, not the pests

We love our pets but not the baddies that can hitch a lift on them. **Jenny Moffett** looks at how to protect our family.

Our pets bring great joy to us, as well as benefits for our health. Research has shown that pets help us keep fit (from all those walks in the park!) and de-stressed. However, animals can also harbour some health hazards for humans. Although we may initially think of rabies or other exotic diseases from abroad, zoonoses (the technical term for diseases that can be passed from animals to humans) can be much closer to home. Broadly, we can divide most of these baddies into creatures that live on the outside, such as fleas and mites, and creatures that live on the inside of animals, such as worms.

Pests on the outside

Ringworm is a fungal skin infection that can affect animals and people alike. It is a particularly badly named disease as it is not a worm and, although it can, it doesn't always cause ring-shaped skin wounds. A fungal infection of the skin, not unlike athlete's foot, ringworm can affect the skin in mainly hairy areas such as the scalp. It is more common in children but can affect anyone. Animals, particularly cats and farm animals, can harbour the infection so be sure that your children wash their hands after a visit to the petting zoo.

Although dog and cat fleas cannot live on humans, they can still give a few irritating bites before they realise this. The cat flea, which is the most common type of flea to affect both cats and dogs, lives in larval form in your carpet and furnishings, waiting for a warm, moving host. Some people are more prone to being bitten than others and often the first signs of fleas in a house are little, itchy red scabs around your ankles! If you suspect fleas, talk to your vet. He or she will be able to give you advice on the two key steps of curing the problem: protecting your animal and clearing the house of larvae.

Mange is a very itchy skin condition that comes from a tiny creature, the *Sarcoptes* mite. Dogs suffer from mange more than cats – particularly those that have contact with foxes, which can carry the mite. Dogs with mange often start to lose their hair, have scabby skin and are constantly scratching. Like the flea, the dog mite cannot live for long on a human host but it can sometimes cause a particularly nasty rash – usually on the arms or abdomen (where hugging the animal may have brought skin into contact).

If you have any sort of a skin condition, it's always important to mention to your doctor that you have pets. Sometimes there may be no sign of a skin problem on the animal – cats, for example,

can carry ringworm without any visible signs. Always remember to wash your hands, and to make sure that children wash their hands, after playing with animals. There are medications that your vet can provide to treat and provide protection against mange and fleas. There are no preventative medications, however, for ringworm.

Pests on the inside

We all know our animals can get worms. But did you know that some of these worms can also live inside us? Some can make their home inside us with no outward sign of ill health, but some can cause serious problems.

The dog tapeworm, *Dipylidium caninum*, lives in both cats' and dogs' guts. Around half a metre in length, the adult worm is made up of many segments – each of which contains up to 30 worm eggs. When a segment falls off, it comes out with the animal's droppings.

Fleas that land on these will eat the eggs, which will then hatch and begin to mature inside the fleas' body. When a dog or cat nibbles at, and swallows, the infected flea, it becomes infected with the worm. However, if a person intercepts this cycle and mistakenly eats a flea (they can be matted

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into the coat of the animal), he or she will become infected. Here, the worm larva attaches to the inside of the person's gut and grows to maturity. Although there may be no symptoms, such worm infestations can sometimes cause diarrhoea and tummy cramps. Tapeworm infection is not, unfortunately, the most serious way an animal worm can affect a human. The roundworm, *Toxocara canis*, which is found in the guts of puppies and older dogs, can have much more severe consequences. These worms produce a large number of eggs in the animal's gut which also end up in the droppings. In this case the eggs, which are extremely sticky, can affect the human without need of a flea. People become infected by accidentally swallowing the eggs, which may have stuck to the animal's coat, or by eating food that is contaminated with soil containing the eggs (e.g., raw, unwashed vegetables). Instead of growing into a worm, the *Toxocara* eggs hatch and its larvae travel through the person's body. Often this does not cause a problem, but sometimes the larvae can affect the host's body organs. If the worm larva enters the eye, it can cause blindness. This, like most *Toxocara* infections, is most likely to occur in children up to eight years. This is because children are more likely to come into contact with contaminated soil or sand and are less likely to wash their hands properly.

Toxoplasmosis, caused by the parasite *Toxoplasma gondii* (*T. gondii*), is another serious disease that can be passed from animal to human. One of the world's most common parasites, it's estimated that about 40 per cent of the world's population is infected with the parasite *T. gondii*, which is found in undercooked or raw meat and cat faeces. In the majority of cases, if people come in contact with the parasite, their immune system can defend the body from infection. However, there may be more serious consequences for those who are pregnant (it can cause miscarriage) or those with a weakened immune system, e.g., someone with HIV.

To prevent human infection with worms it is important to keep all pets in the house treated with a good wormer – one that clears roundworms and tapeworms. Flea treatment to keep *Diplydium* at bay is also important. Bear in mind that others may not be quite as scrupulous as you with worming so don't let children play in areas where dogs or cats may have defaecated. Also, teach children to wash their hands after playing and before eating. Outside, make sure you bring a 'poop scoop' with you and that you use it. Don't let cats use sand pits or the garden as litter boxes. Inside, dispose carefully with litter and, ideally, clean the tray daily with boiling water.

Although animals may play unsuspecting host to some 'baddies', we shouldn't be afraid to welcome pets into the home. Just make sure you follow the few simple, and common sense, guidelines above and everyone – apart from the unwanted lodgers – will be happy!

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