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Dr. Andress is the co-owner of Gate City Animal Hospital in Greensboro, which was established in 1997. He received his B.S. in Microbiology from Clemson University, then went on to obtain his Doctor of Veterinary Medicine from the University of Georgia. His work has been published in several veterinary medicine journals and he has spoken at local and national veterinary conferences. His special interests are in surgery and internal medicine.

Ticks and Your Pet

It seemed like winter lasted forever this year, but spring has now finally arrived. All of us are excited to spend more time walking in the woods, playing in the park and just spending time in our back yard. Unfortunately, all of these activities increase our risk of tick exposure. There is nothing worse than finding that one of these disgusting insects, more correctly arachnids, have attached and are feeding on us or our pets. Recent data has shown that ticks are increasing in numbers. This is thought to be due to changing weather patterns, people living closer to wildlife and the increasing white-tail deer population which is a major tick host.

Ticks have a complicated life cycle. A tick egg hatches into a larva, then changes to a nymph and develops into an adult tick which lays eggs and starts the cycle again. Female ticks can lay up to 6,000 eggs. This process takes about two years to complete. Depending on the species, the tick usually eats - takes a blood meal - before progressing on to the next stage. It varies with the type, but some ticks are no bigger than a freckle. Not only is thinking about a tick feeding on you or your pet gross enough, ticks can transmit some very dangerous diseases. Bacteria located inside the tick are periodically vomited out while the tick feeds. The bacteria quickly get into the blood stream where they can make us or our pets sick.

Most of us have heard of the tick transmitted diseases Lyme and Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever. Ehrlichiosis, Babesiosis, Cytauxzoonosis (infects cats), Tularemia and tick paralysis are some of the other diseases that ticks can harbor. Depending on which tick transmitted disease a pet has, the symptoms can vary widely. Some will cause fever, joint pain and swelling, lethargy, lymph node enlargement and rashes. Other diseases can lead to life threatening blood problems and paralysis. Lyme disease is the only tick related

disease that can be prevented in dogs by using an annual vaccine. Some of these diseases can be hard to diagnose and others may result in symptoms that do not resolve even after treatment. Like I said before, ticks are disgusting.

The best way for our pets not to get sick is to avoid tick exposure. Yards should be kept mowed with leaves and other debris removed from under bushes and trees where ticks like to hide. Dogs and cats should be checked for tick exposure each time that they return from being outside. Fortunately, there are many products available for dogs and cats that reduce tick exposure. Sprays and dips are generally considered older means of controlling ticks. However, there are some products that are useful. Tick collars are available with a varying degree of effectiveness. There are topical insecticides that are put on the skin of the neck and back which control ticks for one month after each application. This method is currently the most popular preventative. There are several new oral tablets that control ticks for one to three months. Many people are finding these tablets very effective, convenient and they do not leave a residue on their pet. Be careful, some of the dog products are toxic to cats. You should talk with your veterinarian to develop an ideal tick prevention program for your pet.

If a tick is found on your pet it should be immediately removed. The best way to safely dislodge a tick is to use tweezers and gently grasp the head and mouth parts and slowly pull the tick away from the skin without twisting. Using alcohol on an attached tick, heating a tick with a match, or painting a tick with finger nail polish are all ineffective ways to remove ticks. The tick should be disposed of by putting it in a designated container of alcohol. Ticks should not be squeezed as this may increase the chance of disease transmission. The skin where the tick was removed should be examined for any tick parts that were not completely removed and then apply a mild disinfectant. Wash your hands well after handling ticks. Ideally, the date of tick removal should be recorded in case your pet does get sick. This may be helpful in deciding if further testing for tick transmitted disease is warranted. It is also important to observe the skin around the tick bite for swelling or redness and carefully noting your pet's appetite and behavior for any changes.

It is time to get outside and enjoy the warmer weather. Ticks are more than just a nuisance, they can transmit deadly diseases. Be careful when entering tick territory by checking your pets and using preventatives. Talk to your veterinarian about what is the best tick preventative product for your pet so we all can have a fun but healthy summer.



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