



BELMONT SHORE
VETERINARY HOSPITAL
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Giardia

Giardia is a microscopic parasite that is infectious to both humans and pets. These parasites are often found in the intestines of many animals, including dogs and cats, and have the potential to cause serious illness. It is also the most common intestinal parasite affecting North Americans.

To understand the threat of Giardia, it is important to understand its life cycle, which occurs in stages. In the first stage, inactive cysts are found in contaminated water and feces. Once ingested by animals, these cysts open and discharge what are called trophozoites. These may live in the digestive track for years, clinging to the surface of the intestines, or floating free in the mucous lining the intestine. Infected animals then shed the parasites into the environment where the Giardia can remain infective for months. Thus, the presence of cysts in the environment can trigger an outbreak in people as well as pets.

While many pets are Giardia carriers, some show no symptoms while others get sick and need treatment. Signs associated with Giardia range from mild to severe diarrhea, weight loss, listlessness and poor appetite. Because not all infected pets show signs of disease and due to our inability to accurately diagnose every infected pet, we recommend treating ALL pets in the household even if they are not symptomatic.

Diagnosis

In the past, diagnosis was difficult due to limitations in testing methodology. Fecal samples were evaluated under the microscope in an attempt to visualize the parasite. More recently a commercial test has been developed (similar in format to a home pregnancy test) that has dramatically improved the ability to detect Giardia infections. Still, Giardia parasites are only intermittently shed into the feces making it harder to diagnose. Occasionally pets need to be retested in order to confirm an infection.

Treatment

Many different medications can be used in treating Giardia infections. The most common is called Flagyl (or Metronidazole). Unfortunately, none of our medications will treat every Giardia infection. In order to know if we have been successful in treating Giardia we repeat a fecal test following initial treatment. We commonly see pets that do not clear their infections either due to re-infection from environmental exposure or because they have a resistant infection. Occasionally we need to use multiple courses of medications in various combinations to clear resistant infections.

Vaccine?

A vaccine for Giardia is currently on the market but it is not intended to prevent infection in vaccinated animals. Instead the vaccine is licensed as an adjunct to treatment in animals with resistant infections. The 2006 American Animal Hospital Association Guidelines list this vaccine as “not recommended” for healthy pets.

Decontamination / Prevention

Because many pets do not show clinical signs of Giardia infection, apparently healthy animals may be spreading the disease in your neighborhood. In order to protect ourselves, our pets and our neighbors, we recommend that all dogs and outdoor cats be tested for Giardia at least 1-2 times per year. In addition, picking up all fecal deposits left by pets, keeping pets clean (infectious Giardia parasites can stick to a pet’s fur), not allowing pets to drink out of potentially contaminated water supplies, and practicing good hand washing techniques are a just a few of the ways to help keep the spread of disease at a minimum.