Feline Parasite Life Cycle, Transmission & Treatment

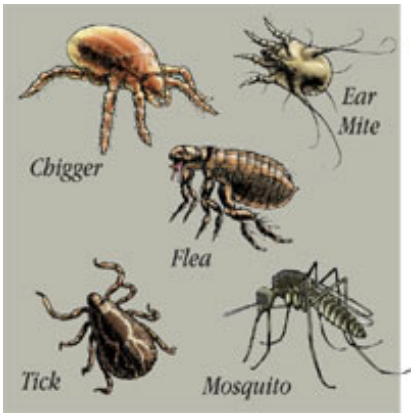
Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

The basics of parasites

Despite their diminutive size, parasites that affect felines are complex creatures. Furthermore, both internal and external parasites are very well adapted to life in or on your cat.

Parasites defined

Basically, parasites are any organism that derives nourishment by feeding on or within another living animal. In veterinary terms, all feline parasites damage your cat's health. More troubling is that some parasites can also be transferred from your cat to humans and other pets.



Life cycle and transmission

Parasites require one or two "host" animals to complete their life cycle and survive. Parasites have developed a wide variety of ways to live, thrive and reproduce. There are two types of parasitic life cycles: direct and indirect. In a direct life cycle, immature forms of parasites can infect the same host from which it came. For example, adult roundworms live in a host's intestines and lay eggs which are passed in the stool, which can then infect the same or a similar host.

In contrast, indirect life cycles require the parasite to pass through an intermediate host before it can re-enter its primary host and complete its life cycle. Tapeworms that can infect cats, for example, require an intermediate host to complete their life cycle. Flea larvae ingest the eggs of the tapeworm, allowing them to hatch. The flea larvae then mature into fleas. When a cat swallows a flea during grooming, the tapeworm is released inside the cat and finishes its life cycle.

Parasites may migrate between areas of the body. Some parasites also use a transport host to move from one host to another, though no development occurs. These intermediate hosts are often rodents or birds.

Treatment options

Preventing a parasitic infection requires strict sanitation standards, insect and rodent control, and annual veterinary exams. Your veterinarian can prescribe or recommend a variety of de-wormers, insecticides, or medications should parasites infect your cat.

Interested in how various types of common parasites affect your cat? Learn how to Spot the Signs of Infection to Protect Your Cat.

*Unauthorized use of any images, thumbnails, illustrations, descriptions, article content, or registered trademarks of **Foster & Smith, Inc.** is strictly prohibited under copyright law. Site content, including photography, descriptions, pricing, promotions, and availability are subject to change without notice. These restrictions are necessary in order to protect not only our copyrighted intellectual property, but also the health of pets, since articles or images that are altered or edited after download could result in misinformation that may harm companion animals, aquatic life, or native species.*