



*Protecting and enhancing the lives of lost,  
unwanted and homeless animals.*

## **Tapeworms**

### **General Information**

#### *Dipylidium caninum*

*Dipylidium caninum* is the most common tapeworm found in dogs and cats. *Dipylidium caninum* is an intestinal parasite with an interesting lifecycle. The adult worm lives in the intestine of dogs and cats. The worm consists of a head, a neck, and a series of tail segments. The worm can be 6 inches long or more. The head of the worm hooks onto the intestinal wall using rows of teeth. Each of the tail segments are separate entities with their own digestive system and reproductive capability. The worm absorbs nutrients from the food in the intestinal tract as the food passes through. The worm continues to produce new segments which gradually move along the tail as older segments break off the end. Once a segment has reached the end of the tail and breaks off, it has become a sack of eggs.

The egg sacs are passed out of the rectum either in the stool or on the rear end. Fresh sacs are the size of a grain of rice (but is flat) and are often seen to be moving on their own. When the sac's dry, they look more like a sesame seed. Once dry, the sac breaks open and the eggs are released.

At this point, the eggs are not infectious to mammals. If flea larva are in proximity to the eggs, they may ingest the eggs as they graze on organic debris in the environment (such as flea dirt on the dog's bedding). As a larval flea develops into an adult flea, the tapeworm egg inside of the flea develops into a young tapeworm that is ready to infect a host. The host becomes infected when the flea is ingested by the host. The flea's body is digested and leaves behind the tapeworm, which then attaches itself to the intestinal wall and begins the lifecycle again. It can take 3 weeks from the time a flea is ingested until the tapeworm begins to shed segments.

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### Taenia spp.

Taenia genus are other types of tapeworms that can infect cats and dogs. Specifically *Taenia hydatigena* (dogs), *Taenia taeniaformis* (dogs and cats), *Taenia serialis* (dogs), and *Taenia pisiformis* (dogs). These worms can be extremely long (for example *Taenia hydatigena* can be 5 yards long). Rather than fleas, these worms use intermediate hosts such as rodents, rabbits, cattle, and sheep. In the intermediate hosts the larva develops and then waits in the abdominal cavity. Once the intermediate host dies or is killed and then consumed by the dog or cat the worm may also be consumed. Once inside the intestinal tract of the host, the worm attaches to the intestinal wall and begins the lifecycle again.

Tapeworms are not particularly harmful, although a heavy infestation could cause weight loss. Humans can also get tapeworm but would have to swallow a flea in order to become infected. Children tend to be most vulnerable to tapeworms.

### **Recognition of Tapeworm**

In the shelter environment, tapeworms are usually recognized by visual identification of segments in fresh stool. Segments may also be observed stuck to the anus of an animal.

Segments are flat, white and the approximate size of a grain of rice. Often they can be seen moving.

Sometimes an infected animal will “scoot”; drag its anus along the ground, because the segments are irritating its skin.

### **Prevention of Tapeworm**

Proper flea control is the best way to prevent tapeworm infections. (see IDP for Fleas)

Handwashing, particularly for children, should be enforced in the shelter.

### **General Policy**

Tapeworms are considered to be treatable

### **Initial Response**

#### Animal Placement

If a tapeworm segment is identified in an animal’s stool, examine that animal immediately for signs of fleas. The presence of a tapeworm is an indicator of a flea infestation. It is possible that the animal acquired the tapeworm from a previous flea infestation and that it has been already treated for fleas and they are no longer present. It is still a good idea to examine the animal for fleas. If evidence of fleas exists then the

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animal should be separated from other animals immediately. Contact the veterinarian for advice on treatment and wash all bedding in dilute bleach immediately. Examine other animals in the shelter for evidence of fleas.

### Treatment

Tapeworms can be killed with Praziquantel (brand name Droncit) which is available in tablet form. This kills the worm which is then digested and absorbed rather than shed.

All animals should be checked for fleas and treated immediately. If fleas are not eliminated the host could become reinfected.

### Cleaning

Follow the regular cleaning protocol. Fresh feces should be picked up immediately after they are deposited.

### Public Safety

Encourage the public to wash their hands after handling animals and their blankets, bedding etc.

### **Monitoring and Recovery**

No specific monitoring is required after an animal has been dewormed. It is possible for an animal to become infected.