

HOW TO REMOVE AND PREVENT TICKS IN YOUR CAT

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TREATMENT AND PREVENTION

Ticks, as with fleas, are irritating little insects that prey on cats. Their goal in life is to find a warm-blooded creature so that they can feed. Veterinarians and pet owners have been battling these tiny parasites for decades and the war continues.

Ticks are members of the Acarina order and are not insects. Ticks and mites are in a class all by themselves. In the transmission of disease, mosquitoes and ticks are the primary concern, with ticks being the most important.

Ticks are divided into 3 different families. Only 2 of these families are present in the US, the *Ixodidae* (hard tick) family and the *Argasidae* (soft tick) family. Within the *Ixodidae*, there are about 60 different species that have been reported in the US. Within the *Argasidae* family, there are about 20 reported US species.

There are 4 stages in the life cycle of a tick: egg, larva, nymph and adult. This life cycle can be completed within 2 months. The larvae, nymph and adults all feed on blood and after a feeding, the tick falls from the feeding source and the larva will molt to a nymph, the nymph will molt to an adult and the female adult will lay eggs. Male ticks ingest far less blood than females.

When ticks are in need of a blood meal, they seek out prey by heat sensors. When a warm object passes by them, they attach to this object by clinging to clothing or fur or falling from trees onto the object.

After the prey has been chosen, the tick migrates to an area that has little hair or does not present difficulty in feeding (the ears and skin around the ears or lips are common places). The tick inserts its pincher-like mouthparts into the skin and begins feeding. These mouthparts are locked in place and will only dislodge when the tick has completed the meal. Once the meal is complete, the adult female will fall from the prey and seek shelter. Eggs are born and the adult female dies.

TICK REMOVAL

Many methods have been tried to remove ticks, many of which are not recommended. Applying a recently extinguished match or even a still lit match to the body of the tick will NOT cause the tick to back out and fall off. The mouthparts only let go when the tick has completed the meal. Also, applying fingernail polish will suffocate the tick but will not cause the tick to fall off.

- The best recommendation to remove a tick is to use a tweezers or commercially available tick removal device and pull the tick off. Do not touch the tick since diseases can be transmitted. Consider wearing



gloves when removing a tick.

- With a tweezers or tick removal device, grab the tick as close to the head as possible. With steady, gentle pressure, pull the tick out of the skin. Frequently, pieces of skin may come off with the tick.
- If the head of the tick remains in the skin, try to grab it and remove as much as possible. If you are unable to remove the entire head, don't fret. This is not life threatening. Your pet's immune system will try to dislodge the head by creating a site of infection or even a small abscess.
- Usually no additional therapy is needed, but if you are concerned, contact your family veterinarian. There are surgical instruments that can be used to remove the remaining part of the tick.

TICK CONTROL AND PREVENTION

Control and prevention of ticks is extremely important in reducing the risk of disease associated with ticks. This includes removing the ticks as soon as possible and trying to prevent attachment.

Tick avoidance requires avoiding environments that harbor them. Extra care should be taken in the woods and areas with tall grass or low brushes. When traveling, be aware that certain areas of the country have a much higher incidence of ticks (i.e. the northeast). In addition, since they can be carried unknowingly from one place to another on clothing or the body, it is always possible for an individual or animal to come into contact with a tick.

Ticks may be killed by spraying, dipping, bathing, or powdering, or applying topical medications to affected individuals with appropriate tick-killing products. Tick collars or products applied topically may act to prevent attachment of new ticks and to promote detachment of ticks already attached.

There are many products on the market that control ticks. Some are over the counter; others are prescription, only available through your veterinarian. Whether one purchases an over the counter or prescription product, it is a good idea to consult your veterinarian first.

Some of the safest and most effective products that your veterinarian may recommend include topical spot-on products and certain tick collars. Topical spot-on products are generally applied on the skin between your pet's shoulders once a month. Some are effective against other parasites as well (i.e. fleas, internal parasites). Systemic topical products include Frontline® and Frontline Plus® (fipronil with or without methoprene, an insect growth regulator) and Revolution® (selamectin). Tick products for dogs should **NEVER** be used on cats because severe toxicity and death may occur.

DISEASE TRANSMISSION

Ticks are considered excellent carriers and transmitters of various diseases. Ticks within the *Ixodidae* (hard tick) family transmit the majority of disease. The brown dog tick and the American dog tick are the most common carriers of disease. This includes cytauxzoon, ehrlichia and Lyme disease.

Although all ticks have the potential to transmit disease, the vast majority of tick bites are disease-free. Still it is a good idea to check your pet frequently for any signs of ticks, after he or she comes back from



a potential tick infested area, even if using tick prevention medications. Finding these pests and quickly removing them are important methods of controlling potential disease. The sooner ticks are removed from your pet, the less likely any disease transmission will occur.

The best method of controlling disease transmission is through a combination of tick avoidance and using tick preventative medications.

Your veterinarian can decide the best method of tick control for your pet, based on his or her risk factors (potential exposure, life-style, geographic location), and the need for any additional parasite control coverage. The advent of the many tick control medications has made tick control and prevention of disease easier and safer than ever.

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