

All About Pets

The national pet care information service



DOGS AND HUMAN HEALTH



THE BLUE CROSS

Britain's pet charity

Owning a pet is one of life's pleasures and, unlike some other pleasures, pets are positively good for children and adults alike. Pet owners have a reduced risk of heart disease and seem less prone to other illnesses – on average they visit the doctor less. Stroking dogs aids relaxation and stress, and pets help children to learn caring and nurturing skills.



However, people are sometimes worried that they may pick up illnesses from pets. This does not happen often and the chances of catching an infection from a pet can be greatly reduced by taking a few simple measures. Teach children to wash their hands after handling animals, or after playing on ground where animals have been – and adults should do the same.

There are many different types of infections that may, under some circumstances, be caught from contact with pets. However, it is not common to catch illnesses from pets. Even among veterinary staff, back strain from lifting animals is more common than catching disease.

Certain groups of people are more at risk. Those suffering from diseases that reduce immunity (such as AIDS), or those who are either on cancer chemotherapy or drugs following transplantation surgery, need to be careful to wash their hands or wear gloves when handling animals. They should avoid aggressive play with dogs and be wary of petting excitable, aggressive or fearful dogs. If you are suffering from one of these conditions, seek specialist advice. If you are considering getting a dog, it may be better to get an adult, as puppies are more likely to be a source of infection.

More importantly, prevention is better than cure, and you are less likely to pick up an infection from a healthy dog. When you first get a dog, ask the vet for advice on how to keep your dog healthy and continue to take your pet regularly for checkups.

Fleas

This is the most common condition that pet owners can catch from their dogs. Fleabites are not serious, but may cause itchy red spots, often around the wrists and ankles. Get a good flea product from the vet – flea collars and proprietary products are not effective. Treat the environment as well to get rid of the eggs. Dogs and cats can share their fleas but dog and cat fleas do not live on humans (*see the All About Pets leaflet, Basic Healthcare (D6)*).

Dog bites

Again, prevention is best, and the chance of a dog biting people is reduced by proper socialisation – that is, ensuring that your puppy learns to make human and animal friends and feels comfortable in a range of situations (*see the All About Pets leaflet, Socialising (D17)*). Get puppies used to children from an early age, but supervise to see that they are handled gently. Correct handling and training are important. Train your puppy not to “mouth” or nip (*see the All About Pets leaflet, Introducing your Dog to the family (D18)*).

Children and dogs should never be left together without supervision. Small children can make unpredictable movements that may scare dogs and provoke a bite. Some dogs



have a tendency to chase running children. All children should be taught that it is best to stand still if a dog runs towards them and to cross their arms with hands held under armpits. They should also learn to approach strange dogs carefully and to ask owners before stroking.

If your dog is showing any “difficult” behaviour, there are many books available on dog behaviour or your vet can recommend an animal behaviourist for advice (*see the All About Pets leaflet, Training (D16)*).

Dog bites do carry a risk of infection, so should be immediately washed well with soap and water. Consult your doctor for advice, particularly if the bite becomes swollen, infected or is on a joint. Ensure that your tetanus protection is up to date.

If you have to pick up an injured dog, remember dogs in pain may bite. Be careful and improvise a muzzle by putting a bandage round the nose if necessary. Small dogs may be picked up using a thick towel.

Ringworm

Ringworm is not a worm but a fungus, similar to athlete's foot. It produces infective "seeds" called spores, which persist in the environment and are quite common. They can infect skin in all animals, including people and dogs, although infection in people is uncommon and it usually just causes one or two circular patches of red, irritated skin. It can sometimes be more severe in children, or immuno-suppressed people. If you think you have ringworm, see your doctor.

In dogs, ringworm has a number of different appearances, most often areas of hair loss with a crusty covering. Young, geriatric dogs or longhaired dogs are more commonly affected. Consult the vet for any skin conditions in your dog.

Do not let children handle infected dogs, and wear gloves and an apron when giving treatments. Note that some tablets should not be handled if you are pregnant. Restrict the dog to one room so that spores are not spread through the house. Soft furnishings and carpets should be vacuumed thoroughly and frequently, or steam cleaned, to remove the spores. The vacuum bag should be emptied afterwards and the contents burnt. Other items should be cleaned with a disinfectant. Discuss with your vet which disinfectants are effective. Bedding and toys that cannot be cleaned are best burnt.

Intestinal worms

Most puppies have roundworms, which they catch from their mothers through the placenta and in milk. The worms live in the bowel and shed eggs in the faeces. Occasionally people become infected (by accidentally swallowing the microscopic eggs), causing various problems, including – in rare cases – eye damage.

Dogs can also get tapeworms, either from hunting or swallowing fleas when grooming. In a few cases these have infected humans. The best protection is regular worming, using a wormer from the vet. Wash your hands after handling dogs or puppies and give regular flea treatment. Act as a responsible owner and be sure to "poop scoop" after your dog.

Puppies and nursing mothers are the largest source of infection and they should be wormed every two weeks until the puppies are 12 weeks old. All dogs should be wormed two to four times a year, and bitches should be wormed 30 days after being on heat. A special worming programme for pregnant bitches can reduce the transmission of worms to the puppies – consult your vet.

Campylobacter, salmonella, giardia and others

Finally, there are also some less common diseases that are occasionally caught from dogs. A minority of healthy dogs carry some of the common bugs that cause food poisoning (salmonella, campylobacter, giardia and others) and these can be transmitted in the faeces. Again, they are easily avoided by washing your hands after handling dogs or cleaning up faeces.

One cause of a cough in dogs (bordetella) can occasionally be passed on to people, but immuno-suppressed people and children are more at risk. Washing hands after handling and not allowing your dog to lick your face reduces the risk.

Leptospirosis

The name of this disease may be familiar as part of the routine annual dog vaccinations. It is spread in urine and rats and other rodents are the usual source, although it can be caught from the urine of any infected animal, including dogs, sometimes several months after recovery.

Infection in people is rare and usually only causes a flu-like illness. The vast majority of cases in people occur among campers and sewer workers, as the bacterium survives well in a damp environment, especially stagnant water. Occasionally it is serious and, in a few cases, fatal in both dogs and people as a result of damage to the liver and kidneys.

If your dog gets an infection that the vet suspects is leptospirosis, you will be advised on the precautions you should take. Tests for definite diagnosis may take a few days so wear gloves when cleaning up urine or handling infected dogs.

Animals that are ill are the biggest source of infection, so make sure your dog is vaccinated annually, as protection is often not long lasting. Although the vaccination is not effective against every strain of leptospirosis, it is still worthwhile. Cases of illness in people are rare, but avoid eating, drinking or smoking when handling animals, especially on farms, and always wash your hands afterwards.

Dogs and asthma

Allergy to dogs can cause asthma, although recent studies suggest being born into a family with a dog may reduce a child's likelihood of suffering from asthma. It is sometimes difficult to determine whether the presence of a dog in the household is causing the asthma and some detective work may be required. Even for children with asthma related to a pet allergy, removing a pet from the home does not completely avoid all contact,

since the clothes of pet-owning classmates can still carry traces of the material – known as the allergen – that may trigger an attack.

In most cases allergies to pets can be managed. Many sufferers have multiple allergies and minimising exposure to all allergens may help. Try to reduce the amount of allergen material in the house. Good ventilation is important, so open the windows for an hour a day. Do not allow the dog in the bedroom and encourage your dog to go outdoors where possible.

Someone who is not allergic to the dog should vacuum thoroughly using a vacuum with a HEPA filter at least twice a week, and the dog's bedding should be washed weekly. Carpets can be replaced with hard flooring, curtains with blinds and soft furnishings covered with allergen proof covers. Avoid wearing woollen clothing, as this tends to trap allergens.

Groom the dog daily outside the house, and bath once or twice a week. Allergy sufferers should not let the dog touch their face and should wash their hands after handling the dog. If you want to get a dog but you have an allergy, some experimentation may be worthwhile. Some people find that they are worse with longhaired dogs than shorthaired, or with dark coat colours.

Travelling abroad

There are several diseases, not currently present in the UK, which your pet may catch abroad and that can be passed on to people. Some of them are spread to people by insects or ticks not currently found in the UK, so the risk is mainly while you are away. It is a good idea to use insect and tick repellent products to reduce the chances of infection, as some of these illnesses can be serious for dogs and people. Before you travel, consult your vet.

Top tips

- Ask your vet for advice on keeping your dog healthy
- Wash your hands after handling dogs or “poop scooping”
- Treat your dog regularly for fleas and worms, preferably with a product from the vet
- If you have a pet allergy, reducing your contact with other sources of allergy may help



All About Pets

The national pet care information service

All About Pets provides expert advice, information and support for pet owners. It aims to ensure the welfare of Britain's pets by promoting responsible animal care. For further information and advice on caring for your pet or horse visit www.allaboutpets.org.uk. Alternatively, you can write to us at the address below to request a list of available leaflets.

All About Pets is a service of The Blue Cross, Britain's pet charity, which provides practical support, information and advice for pet and horse owners. Through our network of animal adoption centres we rehome thousands of animals each year. Our hospitals provide veterinary care for the pets of people who cannot afford private vets' fees.

How you can help

The Blue Cross is a registered charity and receives no government funding. We rely entirely on the generosity of pet lovers to help support All About Pets and other vital animal welfare projects. Any contribution would be most welcome. For more information on how you can help call us on 01993 822651 or visit our website at www.bluecross.org.uk.



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