

Cestodes -- including *Dipylidium caninum*, *Taenia taeniaformis*, *Taenia pisiformis*, *Taenia hydratigena*, and *Echinococcus multilocularis*.

Tapeworms

Affected Animals:

Dogs and cats of any age, sex, or breed. Although uncommon, cats potentially can spread *Echinococcus* eggs to a human, making him or her a host that harbors the parasite. A fluid filled sac containing the tapeworm larva can develop in the liver, lung, or other organ of the person -- this can lead to illness and possibly even death.

Overview:

An intestinal parasite frequently found in felines, tapeworms infect a cat when it ingests a host such as a rodent, a rabbit, or an adult flea harboring infective tapeworm larvae. There are two common types of tapeworms in the United States: *Taenia*, which comes from rodents or rabbits, and *Dipylidium*, which is transmitted by fleas. *Dipylidium caninum* and *Taenia taeniaformis* are the tapeworms found most commonly in cats.

Cats with adult tapeworms release a proglottid -- a mature body segment from the tail end of a tapeworm containing eggs -- into the digestive tract. These segments can be noted on the fur around the anus or in the feces. Tapeworms occasionally irritate a cat's rear end and cause itching, but generally do not pose a severe health risk to the animal. Underweight cats and young kittens can lose valuable nutrients to tapeworms and fail to gain weight. Medications are available that effectively eliminate the parasite, although they can become reinfected quickly if preventive measures are not initiated.

Clinical Signs:

Single proglottid or chain seen in feces or pasted to perianal area; animal may have perianal pruritus.

Symptoms:

Individual body segment of the tapeworm, called a proglottid, noted in the cat's feces or stuck in the fur around the anus. The cat may drag or lick its rear end often.

Description:

Tapeworms infect the small intestine of cats and release proglottids, or tapeworm body segments. The proglottids travel through the intestinal tract and out of the body into the feces. Cats also can release tapeworm segments when they are relaxed or asleep. Cats get tapeworms from ingesting rodents, rabbits, or adult fleas. Generally, tapeworms do not compromise a cat's health greatly, although especially thin cats and kittens can lose needed nutrients due to an infection.

There are two common species of the tapeworm parasite that effect cats in the United States: *Taenia*, which comes from ingesting a rodent or rabbit, and *Dipylidium*, transmitted when a cat eats an adult flea. Cats can swallow a flea accidentally when grooming themselves.

Both types of tapeworms are treatable with medication from the examining veterinarian. Reinfection of tapeworms will occur as early as two to three weeks after treatment if fleas are not eliminated or the animal continues to hunt.

Diagnosis:

A tapeworm infection can be diagnosed easily by collecting a tapeworm segment from the cat. A veterinarian may perform a test on the proglottid to determine the species of the tapeworm. Proglottids do not show up commonly on a routine fecal floatation exam because they are too heavy to float. The cat also should be examined for fleas.

Prognosis:

Good if treated and fleas are controlled.

Transmission or Cause:

Cats get tapeworms from ingesting the internal organs of a rodent or rabbit or from eating an adult flea carrying the parasite.

Treatment:

Although dewormers available over the counter are not effective, there are prescription medications that will eliminate tapeworm infections. Flea control should be instituted to avoid recurrence of the infection of *Dipylidium caninum*.

Prevention:

Measures to control fleas on the cat and in the environment should be undertaken. Hunting behavior should be discouraged. To avoid human infection with *Echinococcus*, humans should wear gloves when gardening, cover childrens' outdoor sandboxes, and wash their hands well after cleaning the litter box or working in soil.