

Only very small numbers of people pick up diseases from pets. When this happens it is mostly by bites, scratches or direct contact with the animal faeces (stools). Pets play an important part in many people's lives and with proper care and attention to pet health and hygiene the risks can be properly controlled.

This leaflet deals with the some infections that may be passed on to people in contact with dogs & cats. All pets, not just cats and dogs, can be infected with germs without having any symptoms themselves.

Prevention of diseases

Here are some basic tips:

- ❖ Don't allow children to play in areas that are covered in dog or cat faeces
- ❖ Wear gloves when removing animal faeces and cleaning litter trays
- ❖ Wash hands properly where possible after direct contact with pets, cleaning animal cages and before eating
- ❖ Keep sandpits covered when not in use, to avoid children coming into contact with animal faeces
- ❖ De-worm dogs & cats regularly
- ❖ Teach children to avoid being licked, especially in the face and not to eat dirt or soil
- ❖ Don't allow cats on kitchen work surfaces

When to see a doctor

If an animal has bitten a person, immediate cleaning of the injured area with soap and water will reduce the risk of infection. If swelling and inflammation occur consider seeking medical advice. Animal bites should be taken seriously and may need medical attention. Fever and diarrhoea are often symptoms of diseases which animals can transmit to people. If unusual symptoms occur, it is always best to seek medical advice.

Diseases in brief

Diseases from dogs & cats in the UK are uncommon but include:

❖ **Campylobacter**

This germ causes gut infections and can be transferred easily from animals, especially puppies, to humans. Direct contact with animal faeces is not the only source. These bacteria are also found in raw meat, undercooked poultry, untreated water and unpasteurised milk. Tummy cramps and pain, diarrhoea, nausea and vomiting, as well as fever are all symptoms of this infection. Usually no special treatment is needed. In severe cases, an antibiotic can be prescribed.

❖ **Salmonella**

Salmonella germs are found in the gut and faeces of humans and animals, as well as in many different foodstuffs, especially raw meat. They can cause food poisoning, which in turn leads to diarrhoea and vomiting. The symptoms of salmonella poisoning are headaches, a fever, diarrhoea and tummy cramps. Cases mostly clear up by themselves and do not require special treatment. Medical attention should be sought for the very young, the very old and those who have weakened immunity. It is wise to consult a doctor if the diarrhoea becomes severe in anyone, as dehydration may result.

❖ **Giardia & cryptosporidium**

These are parasites called protozoa that can cause gut disease. Direct contact with pets may cause people to be infected with these parasites. Diarrhoea and severe stomach cramps are the most common symptoms of this infection. Once again, in most people, the symptoms disappear by

themselves after two to three days, but in people who have immune system problems (ie HIV, cancer or following organ transplants), these infections could be fatal.

❖ **Toxoplasmosis**

This illness is caused by a parasite found in birds and mammals. Cats play an important role in the spread of toxoplasmosis. They become infected by eating infected rodents, birds, or other small animals. The parasite is then passed in the cat's faeces. Careful handling of cat litter will avoid many infections. Infected people do not often show any signs of the disease. Those most at risk are those who are pregnant or have a weakened immune system. Those who do get sick usually have a flu-like illness and may experience fever, sore throat, sore muscles, tiredness and swollen glands. In some cases the infection can also cause temporary blurred or eye-sight loss. Most people will recover from toxoplasmosis without treatment. However medication is available to treat the infection if needed.

❖ **Toxocariasis**

This infection is caused by roundworms found more commonly in the intestines of puppies and kittens but can also be in older dogs and cats. The worms produce large numbers of eggs ending up in their faeces. Humans become infected by accidentally swallowing worm eggs, or by eating food that is contaminated with soil containing the eggs (such as unwashed raw vegetables). Toxocariasis cannot be spread from person to person. Infected people often have no or only mild symptoms. Symptoms are varied and include pneumonia, coughing, fever, skin rash and liver enlargement. Severe outcomes are rare but possible – such as reduced vision and in some cases blindness. Dogs and cats should be de-wormed regularly.

❖ **Ringworm**

Ringworm is a skin disease caused by a fungus. It causes circular marks under the skin. It is not caused by a worm. Ringworm is an infection in the dead layer of the skin, hair and nails. It can be transmitted between pets and people easily through touch. Children are very prone to ringworm infections. The most common sign of ringworm is an itchy and raw painful rash. Sometimes the rash can become scaly and blisters can form. Ringworm often affects the feet, groin, scalp and nails. There is also a form of ringworm called body ringworm that can develop anywhere on the skin.

Most often these skin infections can be treated, usually with antifungal creams. It is important that instructions are followed carefully, as fungal infections can return easily if treatment is stopped too soon.

Cleaning up after dogs

Please note: The Dog Fouling (Scotland) Act 2003 makes it an offence for any person who is responsible for a dog, not to remove and correctly dispose of any faeces after the animal has fouled in any public open space where the public has access to. Fines of up to £500 can be imposed.

Need further advice or information?

- ❖ NHS Inform www.nhsinform.co.uk
- ❖ NHS24 ☎ 111 www.nhs24.co.uk
- ❖ www.nhsborders.scot.nhs.uk
- ❖ Local health clinic or GP

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