

WATCH OUT FOR TICKS

Ticks are everywhere and their prevalence in Ontario is increasing especially along the northern shores of Lakes Ontario and Erie.

They are often found in wooded areas and long grass, but can also be found in leaf litter, brush and cut grass in your back yard. They fall off squirrels, deer, or mice before they attach to your dog (or you!). Ticks are particularly active in the cool, wet spring and fall months but anytime the temperature falls between 4°C and 24°C they can be out searching for a host. Ticks carry diseases that can result in serious illness in humans, dogs, horses and sporadically in cats.

There are four different types of ticks in North America. The deer tick (blacklegged), American dog tick, brown dog tick and lone star tick. Deer ticks can transmit Lyme disease or anaplasmosis, and brown dog ticks transmit ehrlichiosis and anaplasmosis while feeding. Ticks can also transmit Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever, Q Fever, Neorickettsia and Babesia. In Ontario we are mainly concerned with Lyme disease, anaplasmosis and ehrlichiosis.

Lyme Borreliosis (Lyme disease) is one of the most common tick transmitted diseases in the world. Lyme disease has been reported in humans, dogs, horses and very occasionally in cats. In dogs it can cause a recurrent lameness due to arthritis, poor appetite and depression and in the most severe cases, kidney, heart or neurologic disease. Lyme disease is transmitted after a deer tick has been attached to a dog for at least 18 hours although dogs will not exhibit signs of illness until 2-5 months later.

Ehrlichiosis is transmitted more rapidly than Lyme disease after a tick

attaches, possibly within 4 hours. Ehrlichiosis affects dogs and, extremely rarely, it has been reported in cats. It can cause a wide range of symptoms from mild (lethargy, depression, poor appetite and weight loss) to severe (spontaneous bleeding, difficulty breathing and neurological disease). In some cases, dogs will present with only uveitis, which are painful, red eyes. Dogs typically become ill more than two months after tick exposure. Without treatment, the disease can progress to permanent blindness, bleeding complications and death.



Anaplasmosis takes approximately 24 hours for transmission and dual infection with both Lyme disease and anaplasma is possible. It may also cause lethargy, high fever, loss of appetite and swollen, very painful joints. Vomiting, diarrhea and increased bleeding tendencies are also possible clinical signs.

What do you do if your dog has a tick? The first step is proper removal; your veterinarian or local pet store may have a small plastic removal device called a tick twister. Gently twisting the tick until it releases ensures that the entire tick is removed and minimizes the chance of severing the head from the body. Please contact your veterinarian to have the head removed if it is left in your dog as it causes a painful inflammatory reaction (large bump) when left in place.

Approximately 6 weeks following tick exposure, it is recommended that a

very simple blood test is run to determine if your dog has become infected with any tick borne disease. If that test is positive, your veterinarian may recommend additional tests (complete blood count, blood panel or urine sample) to identify the extent of the infection and the appropriate treatment plan. Treatment may include antibiotics, anti-inflammatories and pain medications.

The best way to prevent tick borne diseases is to stop ticks from attaching and to vaccinate for Lyme disease. It is important to use a product that actually repels ticks and prevents them from attaching. Some products will require the tick to bite (known as a systemic product) and ingest a blood meal to kill the tick. These products give the tick an opportunity to pass on disease to your pet. Even if you are using a tick repellent, vaccination for Lyme disease is recommended as no product or human (owners may miss a dose) is perfect. Ask your veterinarian which combination of drops, collars and vaccination they would recommend to keep your dog healthy and tick free.

It is very important to tell your veterinarian if your dog has had any tick exposure when ill (or healthy!) as it can greatly increase the chance of rapid detection and effective treatment of tick borne diseases. Annual testing is highly recommended for dogs in tick areas to maintain their overall general health.



Dr. Amanda Johnson works at Midtown Animal Hospital in Cobourg, Ontario. She loves spending time with her 12 year old geriatric black Labrador retriever and young family.