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Giardia in Your Pet

Giardia duodenalis is a microscopic parasite that can infect a variety of species including dogs, cats, & humans. The parasite is shed by infected domestic & wild animals. Infection occurs when a patient comes in contact with the infected stool, a contaminated surface or, by drinking water or eating uncooked food contaminated with stool from infected animals. In addition to these routes of transmission, people can also become infected by swimming in contaminated water. Once ingested, giardia attaches to the lining of the intestines & can cause diarrhea in some, but not all, animals.

The most common sign of infection is diarrhea or soft bowel movements, but giardia is often diagnosed as an incidental finding. Definitive diagnosis is based on identification of giardia cysts on fecal examination. Your pet should be screened by your veterinarian for giardia at least once every 6 months. Diagnosis is important because giardia can cause severe disease in immunocompromised people & can be difficult to eliminate from your home environment.

Treatment of the Pet

Giardia should be treated regardless of whether or not your pet is showing clinical signs. The drug of choice used to treat giardia infection (giardiasis) is fenbendazole (Panacur). Since this organism is difficult to eliminate, some patients are put on combinations of anti-parasitic medication &/or given another course of treatment with fenbendazole. Each treatment cycle may last up to 10 days depending on the individuality of each patient. Again, these treatment cycles may be repeated if needed.

Treatment of the Environment

Environmental decontamination is just as important as treating your pet. Dogs will oftentimes re-infect themselves despite successful medical treatment. Giardia can be killed & inactivated using 2-5% Lysol or, a 1% chlorine bleach solution. Here is a list of common environmental areas & surfaces to clean:

1. **Pet's hind end** – bathing pets every day (or at least their hind end) will reduce the risk of re-infection.
2. **Bedding** – can be machine washed in hot water &/or bleach.

- 3. Water & Food Dishes** – can be disinfected in a machine dishwasher.
- 4. Toys** – a commonly overlooked source of re-infection. We recommend machine washing toys as well.
- 5. Outside environment** (puddles or standing water) – Clean the environment daily until the infection is confirmed gone.
- 6. Areas & surfaces** – All areas & surfaces where you pet has been should be considered contaminated.

Dilute ½ cup bleach in 1 gallon of water to make an effective disinfectant solution that will keep its potency for 24 hours. When disinfecting non-porous surfaces, allow at least 5 minutes of wet contact time with the bleach (or Lysol) before wiping the surface dry.

You can help prevent your pets from acquiring or spreading giardia by doing the following:

1. Immediately clean up after your pet when they defecate.
2. Never allow your pet to ingest anything off the ground outdoors.
3. Provide only filtered (or bottled) drinking water. While more common in well water, giardia has sometimes been identified in municipal water supplies.
4. Have your veterinarian test a stool sample at least once every 6 months.

