

Are puppies and kittens a human health hazard?

By Deirdre Cox Baker | Thursday, January 29, 2009



Majdi Omar, a pediatrician in Bettendorf.

The Web site headline might alarm a casual reader: “New study shows high rate of *Toxocara* infection in young children and youth, raises public health concerns.”

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or CDC, prepared a report because a study showed 14 percent of the U.S. population younger than 20 years is infected with *Toxocara*, or internal roundworms, contracted from housepets such as kittens and puppies.

But do not jump to conclusions, Quad-City area health experts say. The great majority of those infected never actually become sick:

n “I’ve had no experience with any of my customers developing *Toxocara*,” said Dr. Scott Sandeman, a Bettendorf veterinarian who has been practicing since 1983.

n “Many people with *Toxocara*, roundworm or hookworm are healthy,” said Dr. Louis Katz, the medical director of the Scott County Health Department. “They carry the infection, but they are not affected by it.”

n “I’ve not encountered *Toxocara* in my practice at all,” said Dr.

The study from the CDC shows that children are most susceptible to the infection because they are more prone to play in, and sometimes even eat, contaminated soil. The infection rate is also more common in less-affluent or poorly educated populations.

The very youngest at risk are those 1-4 years old, Omar said. If symptoms occur, they generally include fever, fatigue and decreased appetite.

The most serious consequence is blindness, but the incidence of that is quite rare. Katz, in 30 years of practicing medicine, has seen four or five cases of *Toxocara* and none that affected the eyes.

Vaccinate pets

Roundworm is a parasite that affects nearly every young dog or cat, Sandeman explained. Dogs can get worms before they are born and cats can get them through the mouth.

“We think 90 percent of pets have roundworms,” he said. Employees where Sandeman practices, at Glenroads Veterinary Clinic in Bettendorf and the LeClaire (Iowa) Veterinary Clinic, make it a habit to speak to pet owners about worms. That practice became routine after the CDC reported the veterinary community was not doing a good job of educating consumers about the problem.

Cats may be given a product called Revolution, which is placed on their fur and ingested as they clean themselves. Dogs are more easily given medication to fight roundworm and heartworm. Once the pets are fully wormed, the risk goes way, way down, Sandeman said.

Emerging trends

The number of diseases that humans may contract from animals is growing, partly because there are better tools to measure the progression, Katz explained. Public health concerns include West Nile virus, which is spread by mosquitoes that feed on infected birds, HIV/AIDS from simians, and Rocky Mountain spotted fever and Lyme disease from ticks.

There also are trends toward increased pet ownership and more people who consider pets to be a member of the family, Sandeman said. “They sleep in beds, are allowed up on food counters. That’s part of their attraction and endearment.”

However, pet owners should use common sense and follow practical hygiene rules, he added.

Zoonotic diseases — those that come from animals — are emerging areas of study, Katz said. The medical community now understands more connections between species. “But infection and illness are not the same thing,” he added.

Tips for avoiding Toxocara

- * Practice good hygiene; wash your hands after handling pets.
- * Use medication to eliminate parasites from pets.
- * Restrict access to play areas and sandboxes.
- * Don’t allow children to eat soil or dirt.
- * Cover sandboxes when they are not in use.
- * Dispose of pet feces on a regular basis.
- * Pregnant women should not change their cat’s litter box. A parasite can exist in cats that may harm a developing fetus.

Sources: www.petsandparasites.org; Dr. Scott Sandeman, DVM