



## Understanding Zoonotic Disease

Pet owners may not be aware that parasites are more than just irritating to the pet, but they can also cause disease in the animal and even transmit diseases to people, called a zoonotic disease. In fact, it is estimated that each year 3 to 6 million people are infected with *Toxocara* (roundworm), which causes a condition called larva migrans.<sup>1</sup>

In humans, roundworm infection may cause tissue damage (visceral larval migrans), affect the nerves or even lodge in the eye (ocular larval migrans). Hookworm larvae typically move within the skin, causing inflammation (cutaneous larval migrans). One type of hookworm can penetrate into deeper tissues and cause serious damage to the intestine and other organs.

Hookworm and roundworm (*Toxocara*) are prevalent intestinal parasites that can be transmitted to people through ingestion of infective eggs in the environment (such as eating contaminated foods), and by direct penetration of the skin (for hookworm only). Although zoonotic diseases can affect anyone, ingestion of infective eggs is more likely to happen to children who encounter a contaminated outdoor area, get the sticky roundworm eggs on their clothes or toys, then their hands and eventually, in their mouth.

To reduce the risk of zoonotic disease transmission:

- Do not walk/allow children to walk barefoot where there is likely to be animal feces.
- Have kittens dewormed by your veterinarian at an early age.
- Keep play areas, lawns and gardens around your home free of animal waste.
  - Bag and dispose of pet feces
  - Cover sandboxes when not in use
- Keep your cat healthy and protected from hookworm and roundworm, and other harmful parasites, with a monthly preventive medicine.

Because pets are susceptible to parasite infection and infestation any place at any time, pet owners are urged to use year-round parasite protection.

For more information on zoonotic disease, talk with your family physician and veterinarian.

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<sup>1</sup> Companion Animal Parasite Council (CAPC) Guidelines, 2005.