

Dear Dr. Wise,

Question: To most pet owners, the return of spring is a joyous occasion. The opportunity to spend quality time with your pet outdoors can be an exhilarating experience. What do I do about ticks?

Answer: Everyone is well aware of the irritation that fleas can cause our pets, as well as pesky mosquitoes spreading heartworm disease. But another problem parasite that shows up in the spring and stays until about October is the tick – and they can cause serious problems, some of them deadly.

There are over 850 known species of ticks in the world and these relatives of spiders can be found as parasites on mammals, birds, and even reptiles. Here in the United States, dog and cat owners have less than a dozen species to deal with, but all of these ticks can harbor a variety of serious diseases, such as tularemia, Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever, and Lyme Disease.

Once on the pet, the tick will begin feeding. The tick's mouth parts are designed to make removal difficult. Their barbed feeding tube has numerous backward facing projections and a substance produced in the tick's salivary glands actually glues the tick in place. Some ticks can feed on 200 to 600 times their body weight in blood and may take several days to finish eating. It is during this blood meal that ticks can spread a number of diseases to their host.

A recent study shows increasing numbers of dogs with positive Lyme Disease tests in the United States. Lyme Disease has been diagnosed in all 48 contiguous states and more than 40% of the 1,400 veterinary clinics surveyed have reported cases of the disease in recent years. Dogs with Lyme Disease will often present with a sudden onset on lameness that appears to come and go. Other symptoms include loss of appetite, high fever, and severe lethargy.

It is possible though, to enjoy the outdoors and protect your pet from ticks at the same time. Flea products routinely purchased through veterinarians are also useful in the war on ticks. Most pet owners want to know when the best times for starting and stopping flea and tick control. For the pet's safety, I recommend year round use of these treatments.

Getting out and enjoying the great outdoors by camping and hiking can be a great bonding experience for you and your dog. The fresh air, added exercise and the thrill of exploring the unknown will add to your relationship with your pet. Following a few simple protective steps will help to make sure that your dog doesn't come home with some unwelcome visitors, or a potentially devastating disease.

If you have a question, write Dr. Wise, Indiana Veterinary Medical Association, 201 S. Capitol Avenue, Suite 405, Indianapolis, IN, 46225, or www.invma.org.