

Coccidiosis

Coccidiosis is an infection with a one-celled organism; these organisms are classified as protozoa and are called coccidia. Coccidia are not worms; they are microscopic parasites that live within cells of the intestinal lining. Because they live in the intestinal tract and commonly cause diarrhea, they are often confused with worms.

Means of Infection

Oocysts (immature coccidia) are passed in the stool. They lie in the environment and eventually sporulate (mature) into a more developed oocyst that can infect the cat again. Cats, dogs, or mice may also become infected. This process can occur in as little as 6 hours, but it usually takes 7-10 days. If the sporulated oocysts are swallowed, they mature in the intestine to complete the life cycle. .

Clinical Signs

Most animals that are infected with coccidia do not have diarrhea or any other clinical signs. However, in young animals and debilitated adults, they may cause severe, watery diarrhea, dehydration, abdominal distress, and vomiting. In severe cases, death may occur. However, as there is a human transfer concern, all animals with the disease must be treated

Diagnosis

Coccidiosis is diagnosed by performing a microscopic examination of a stool sample.

Treatment

The most common drug used to eliminate coccidia is a sulfa-type antibiotic. It is given for 10-14 days. The medication is sweet tasting and objection to the taste is usually not a problem. If the sulfa-type drug is not effective, others are available. Additional medication may be needed if diarrhea and dehydration occur.

Transmission to Humans

The most common coccidia found do not have any affect on humans. However, less common types of coccidia are potentially infectious to humans. One parasite, called *Cryptosporidium*, may be carried by cats or dogs and may be transmitted to people. This parasite has also been found in public water supplies in some major cites. Another coccidial organism, *Toxoplasma*, is of particular concern to pregnant women because of the potential to cause birth defects in newborns.

These two coccidial parasites pose a health risk for immunosuppressed humans (i.e., AIDS patients, those taking immune suppressant drugs, cancer patients, the elderly). Good hygiene and proper disposal of cat feces are important in minimizing risk of transmission of all feline parasites to humans. Although there is risk of the cat transmitting these two particular parasites to humans, it does not warrant removing the cat from the household except in very rare instances.