



Pet Care in Florida¹

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INTRODUCTION

A healthy pet is a happy pet. Many people move to Florida, unaware of the many obstacles their pets may face upon arrival. Strange surroundings, exposure to infectious diseases, external and internal parasites, and climatic conditions may cause severe emotional stress on a formerly well-adjusted pet. Florida is not unique in the diseases and parasites to which a dog or cat may be exposed. However, because of the extended months of warm weather, and the additional time pets spend outdoors, there is greater opportunity for pets to encounter problems. The problems considered in this text will be pet loss, rabies, canine distemper, parvovirus infection, internal and external parasites, and heartworm disease.

Pet Loss

Introducing a pet to strange surroundings may cause the pet to become disoriented or even lost. During this adjustment period, owners should take extra precautions to assure their pet of their love and devotion. Whenever the pet is out of the house, it should be on a leash or in a fenced yard. More attention may be required from the owner for the pet to make the adjustment from its previous familiar home environment to the new surroundings.

Rabies

Rabies is a virus disease transmissible between animals and people. The best and most effective way to

prevent rabies is by vaccinating dogs and cats. Each county in Florida has rules and regulations concerning animal control enforcement and rabies vaccinations for pets. Pet owners who are moving to Florida with their pets should ask a local veterinarian or animal control officer for the particular laws and regulations governing pet vaccination.

Excellent vaccines are available to provide a dog or cat immunity from rabies. Rabies vaccinations should be given when a pet is four months old and continued periodically throughout the animal's life. This is the only way of controlling the spread of rabies from wild animals to pets and to people.

Canine Distemper

Canine distemper is caused by a virus, is distributed world-wide, and was at one time a common disease among dogs. The vaccines available are very effective; today there is little chance of an animal contracting distemper if it is properly vaccinated by a veterinarian. The distemper virus is present throughout the year in Florida and can be transmitted through the air. The virus affects all tissues and organs of the infected dog. There are a variety of symptoms associated with distemper. Most frequently, the first indications are respiratory signs, with a nasal discharge and cough. The animal will have a fever, poor appetite, and diarrhea. Vomiting may also occur. Treatment of canine distemper is difficult and not always successful. Puppies and young dogs without adequate protection are most frequently affected and usually die as a

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result. Older dogs are sometimes successfully treated but may be permanently affected with neurological damage. The best way to prevent this dreaded disease is to vaccinate dogs when they are puppies and to give them periodic "booster" vaccinations throughout their adult lives. A veterinarian should be consulted for current vaccination recommendations for each pet.

Parvovirus Infection

Parvovirus is a highly contagious virus disease among dogs of all ages. The virus attacks the gastrointestinal tract, white blood cells, and the heart muscle. Fecal waste from infected dogs is the source of the infection. The virus is easily transmitted from one location to another on the feet of infected dogs, the shoes of owners, and other objects. The virus is very resistant to environmental conditions and can survive for long periods of time in a contaminated area.

The first signs of parvovirus are usually vomiting and diarrhea. The dog may have a temperature of 104°F or more with a loss of appetite and severe depression. Death may occur in 2 - 3 days among animals left untreated. Dogs of all ages should be vaccinated to prevent Parvovirus infection. Owners should prevent their dogs from coming in contact with the fecal matter of other dogs when walking their dog. Proper disposal of waste from their dog is recommended. Most communities in Florida have reported cases of parvovirus infection in the recent past. Effective vaccination procedures should be undertaken by all dog owners.

Internal Parasites

Internal parasites cause tissue irritation, weaken the animal, and lower the animal's resistance to disease. The most common internal parasites found in dogs and cats include roundworms, hookworms, tapeworms, and whipworms. Diagnosis of internal parasitism can be accomplished by a veterinarian examining a stool sample under a microscope. A pet owner can diagnose tapeworm infection because the tapeworm segments pass in the stool and are visible to the naked eye. The segments are small, white, and may be seen moving when fresh. After the segments dry, they look like brownish grains of rice which can be seen around the pet's rectum or in the pet's haircoat. Tapeworms require an intermediate host to complete their life cycle. The tapeworm, most commonly seen in dogs and cats, uses the flea as an intermediate host, and for this reason, flea control is important in any treatment regimen for tapeworms.

All deworming medications are dangerous and potentially toxic. Many pet owners have either caused serious illnesses or killed their pets by indiscriminately or incorrectly using these drugs. New products are continuously being developed for the control of internal parasites in pets. The veterinarian is the best way to diagnose which internal parasites are present and which medication will be most effective. Many owners become upset when their pets continue to harbor internal parasites a few months after a deworming. However, in most instances, the pet has become reinfected due to continuous exposure to the parasites in the environment.

The conditions of warmth and moisture, which occur in Florida, are conducive to parasite productivity. For this reason, pets in Florida are at extreme risk of repeated exposure to these parasites. Environmental control plus periodic examination of pets for these internal parasites is needed regularly. A stool examination by a veterinarian is recommended at least twice each year for every pet. In certain instances, a more frequent examination may be necessary.

External Parasites

Though the skin and haircoat of dogs and cats serve to protect the body, watch out for problems. The most common external parasites encountered by the pet and pet owner are fleas, ticks, and lice. Mange is also a serious problem that is caused by a small microscopic mite that lives in the skin. Fleas are a major parasitic skin problem for dogs and cats and they present a problem most of the year in Florida.

Fleas cause great irritation to infected pets. Many pets are very sensitive to the flea bites and may display allergic skin reactions to even a small number of fleas. This condition is referred to as Fleabite Allergic Dermatitis and is one of the common causes of skin problems among dogs and cats in Florida. This dermatitis is recognized by the intense itching and scratching of the skin by the affected animal and may continue even after fleas have been removed because allergic signs can last for extended periods.

Control programs for fleas should be initiated by using insecticides both on the pet and in the pet's environment. Dips, shampoos, flea collars, sprays, powders, and foams are available from veterinarians and from local pet stores. A product can be prescribed by a veterinarian to treat the dog orally. This product, in pill or liquid form, is absorbed into the blood system of the animal, and fleas, ingesting the blood of the pet, will be

killed. Other oral flea control products are advertised in some stores. Pet owners are advised to consult with a veterinarian to obtain information on the best and most effective method of flea control for their pet and the environment.

A pet owner may take the following steps for flea control:

- 1) Shampoo the pet. Insecticidal shampoos have very little residual effect but will bring immediate relief to your pet.
- 2) Use an insecticide preparation for pets in the form of a dip, spray, or powder. Be sure to follow the directions carefully and to observe the precautions listed on the label.
- 3) Treat the pet's environment by using insecticide sprays and by vacuuming the house (floors, carpets, and the pet's sleeping area).
- 4) Consult a veterinarian for other recommendations and to obtain more effective or potent treatments.

Whatever products are used on your pet, be sure to read and follow the directions carefully to avoid poisoning. Many products which can safely be used on dogs are poisonous to cats and other exotic animals. When an animal is undergoing severe itching and skin irritation, an owner should suspect allergic dermatitis and seek professional help. A veterinarian can determine the cause of dermatitis and prescribe effective therapy.

Heartworm Disease

Heartworm disease is caused by large, round worms which live in the right side of the heart and adjacent blood vessels of the dog. This disease is usually slow to develop and a great deal of damage may occur to internal organs before the dog demonstrates signs of illness. Heartworms are only transmitted from one dog to another by mosquitoes. An infected dog develops shortness of breath, coughing, weakness and may collapse from heart failure after exercise. Several months may pass after infection before the signs of disease are noticed by the owner. The veterinarian can usually diagnose heartworm infection by an examination of the dog's blood. Early diagnosis and prompt treatment before advanced signs of the disease occur is important for the well-being of the pet. Prevention is the best medicine.

If a dog is found free of adult heartworms after examination by a veterinarian, a preventive medication can be prescribed. This medication is to be given at a

calculated dosage on a daily or monthly schedule depending on the type of product used. Preventative treatment should be initiated when dogs are three months of age. Prevention of heartworms is based on the oral administration of either diethylcarbamazine, ivermectin or milbemycin oxime. These medicines halt development of the heartworm larva, and prevent the parasite from reaching the heart. Diethylcarbamazine should be given to the dog on a daily basis. Ivermectin (Heartgard) and milbemycin oxime (Interceptor) should be administered once a month as a preventative. A dog must be free of heartworms when this medication is given or a severe reaction may result.

In Florida, because the mosquito population is present year-round, the use of the preventive medication is recommended throughout the year. It is also suggested that owners have their dog(s) checked for the heartworm microfilaria at least every 6 months. This can be done when the pet is visiting the veterinarian for a routine health examination.

CONCLUSION

Most pet owners know the value of good medical care for their pet. Many new residents of Florida may not be aware that some pet health problems are intensified in the warm and moist climate of the "Sunshine State." This document only points out a few of the problems which may be encountered, and pet owners should seek professional advice and assistance concerning their pet. Veterinarians are an excellent source of information concerning the health and well-being of dogs and cats. Animal Control Officers are also a good source of information regarding the specific regulations in each county. Pet owners and their pets will enjoy their homes in Florida if owners use vaccines and preventive measures to ensure the continued health of their pets. While the statement "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," usually refers to humans, it's just as true for your pet.