



# Winter parasite review

The year 2020 has been an ongoing struggle for many of us, especially for those of us working in veterinary practices. Although our lives seemingly stood still for much of the year, parasites in small animals remain a significant problem. This article takes information from the quarterly Parasite Forecast, published on the ESCCAP UK & Ireland website [www.esccapuk.org.uk](http://www.esccapuk.org.uk).

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The past year has seen large numbers of rescued cats and dogs imported from abroad and the number of dogs entering the country with heartworm and *Leishmania infantum* infections is currently high. These animals can also harbour a wide range of parasites, including tick-borne pathogens *Mesocestoides* spp., *Dirofilaria repens* and *Thelazia calliapeda*. Many of these parasites are zoonotic and have the potential to become established in the UK.

The past few months has seen a resurgence of positive *Leishmania* spp. and heartworm cases in imported dogs in practice. This might be as a result of the large numbers of new pets purchased and adopted during lockdown, many of which were from abroad. The high number of cases in imported animals emphasises the need for screening imported dogs for both *Leishmania* spp. and heartworm, as well as vigilance for relevant clinical signs and early diagnosis.

## Lungworm

It has been noted by vets that routine preventative treatment against *Angiostrongylus vasorum* has dropped amid the current COVID-19 pandemic and an increase in cases of angiostrongylosis are being seen as a result. Angiostrongylosis can be fatal for cats and dogs, and is an example of how vital routine parasite prevention and treatment is. Most veterinary practices have implemented systems to manage the dispensing of treatments while maintaining social distancing, and every effort should be made to ensure that pet owners continue to follow parasite control programmes.

The high prevalence of focal areas of *A. vasorum* across the UK means that effective diagnostic testing is required to rapidly diagnose

clinically affected animals. Testing dogs with relevant clinical signs to confirm *A. vasorum* infection is also important to update preventative advice based on geographic incidence. A variety of tests are available to assist the diagnosis of *A. vasorum* infection in dogs, including the Baermann technique and antigen testing.

## Environmental contamination

Recent research has reinforced the need to take environmental contamination with insecticides seriously. Fipronil and imidacloprid contamination have been found in UK waterways and there is a strong suggestion that the source may be flea prevention products. Further research is needed into all potential sources of waterway contamination including, but not limited to, the veterinary industry. ESCCAP UK & Ireland continues to encourage more research into this so that environmental contamination can be taken into account when selecting which flea treatments to use. However, year-round flea treatment for cats and dogs remains essential because:

- Exposure to fleas is ubiquitous; no single group of pets is at significantly decreased risk compared to others
- Exposure occurs all year round and if you wait until flea infestations are established then they take months to eliminate, resulting in increased morbidity and discomfort for pets and owners, as well as increased zoonotic pathogen exposure
- If veterinary professionals don't recommend year-round flea treatment for cats and dogs then infestations will occur, leading to many pet owners seeking flea products elsewhere, often without correct application advice (how to apply without spillage, avoid

swimming, and shampooing etc.), leading to more environmental contamination.

## Parasite enquiries

In 2020, ESCCAP UK & Ireland received many enquiries from veterinary professionals and the public regarding a wide range of parasite topics. Previously the majority of enquiries have always related to exotic parasites, but during lockdown we have seen this change for the first time. As travel continues to be restricted, it is likely that enquiries about domestic parasites will remain high up the results table.

The publication of research on environmental contamination with compounds contained in some flea products has led to a record breaking numbers of enquiries regarding the need for year-round flea control. ESCCAP UK & Ireland hopes that an evidence-based debate on current information and future research will continue.

Despite fluctuating trends this year, exotic parasites are never far away in the UK. As more pets are imported from abroad, this will become an increasingly common problem for UK vets. Over the past 3 months, there has been a high number of enquiries regarding leishmaniasis in imported dogs, reflecting another surge of these cases in practice.

COVID-19 is likely to continue affecting our working practices for some time yet and it is impossible to predict the trends that will emerge over the coming months. However, parasites are not going anywhere. As we get used to the 'new normal', we will hopefully see an increase in routine parasite treatments and effective screening of imported dogs in the UK, particularly as there is the opportunity to negotiate new pet travel rules as the UK leaves the EU.