Part of the mission of veterinarians worldwide has always been the protection of human health. For example, rabies control efforts and routine rabies vaccination of pets has greatly reduced the number of human rabies fatalities in the U.S. In the 1940's over 5000 dogs died every year of this disease, and hundreds of people died too.

Between 1980 and 1996 only 32 people died of rabies in the U.S. and 12 of those contracted the disease in foreign countries. Although we don’t like to think of our pets as being harmful to our health, disease can be spread from our companion and farm animals to us and vice versa. Tuberculosis, *E. coli*, *Cryptosporidium*, cat scratch fever, pink eye, toxoplasmosis and ringworm are other examples.

Keeping your pet safe and healthy protects your human family from disease. The most common problems spread from pets to people nowadays are intestinal parasites. **Over 10,000 people, most of them children, are infected with dog or cat roundworms every year in the U.S.** In the wrong host the larvae of these worms get confused. Instead of ending up in the intestinal tract, some of them will migrate to the brain, eyes, liver and other organs. Over 700 people suffer blindness or permanent visual impairment each year from these migrating larvae. Thousands of others develop brain, liver, skin or gastrointestinal signs from roundworm, hookworm and *Giardia* infections.

Because of the human health hazards of these intestinal parasites the human Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta (CDC) has issued deworming guidelines for pets. The American Heartworm Society has made changes in their recommendations as well, because most heartworm preventatives help prevent intestinal parasites in addition to heartworms. Because of these recommendations, many veterinary clinics are adjusting their protocols. Some will offer you choices for heartworm testing and medication protocols.

Unlike heartworms, intestinal parasites are not spread by mosquitoes. They can be acquired by pets all year ‘round, even in parts of the country that have cold winters. Therefore, since Heartgard, Interceptor and Sentinel protect against intestinal parasites as
Female kittens and puppies are born with roundworm larvae already encysted in the uterus, waiting to migrate into future offspring. Encysted larvae are one way even indoor cats can become positive for intestinal parasites. These dormant larvae can awake and reinfect a pet years later. Encysted larvae are resistant to the dewormers currently available.

In a recent nationwide study of 6,458 dogs, 15% were found to have roundworms, 19% had hookworms, 14% suffered from whipworms. In the Midwest, 39.2% of the dogs had at least one of these types of parasite.

It is important to remember that it is still essential to check stool samples on your pets, even if they are on year ‘round preventatives! Heartworms prevent some intestinal parasites but by no means all of them. Even indoor cats get intestinal parasites! Protect your pets and yourself by having stool samples checked at least once a year. Whatever else you do please always remember to wash your hands after cleaning the litter box, picking up stool from the yard, doing gardening or yard work or roughhousing with a pet. Wash your children’s hands too!

When it comes to health care, prevention is the name of the game. Human diseases that are no longer considered a threat in the United States, such as Polio and whooping cough, are still common in 3rd world countries where vaccination is not a standard of care. With air travel what it is today, without vaccinations these diseases would quickly recur.

In pets, it is wild, feral or poorly cared for dogs and cats who serve as the reservoir for contagious diseases. When prevention measures stop these diseases quickly reappear in our pets. Despite rabies prevention efforts, 6500 cases of rabies are reported in wildlife each year in the U.S. and 22,000 people require rabies injections for exposure to the virus annually.

For combination control of multiple parasites, consider Sentinel or the new Revolution, which makes it easier to remember flea control as well as heartworm prevention. Cats that live indoors are at low risk for fleas. Those that go outdoors, even on a leash or limited to a deck or porch, or who live in households with dogs, also may need flea protection. Fleas bite people as well as pets and there are few things more miserable than living in a house infested with them!

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