

Top cat health concerns in spring

By Natalia Macrynika, Studio One Networks

FROM THE PAGES OF **THE DAILY CAT**

A cloud of doom cast over the clear spring skies of Georgia five years ago when a fatal cat disease, Cytosporidiosis -- which can lead to severe malnutrition, dehydration and more -- swept through the state's northern region. "A couple of cases were diagnosed here, too," remembers James Brousse, DVM, owner of The Cat and Dog Clinic in Athens, Ga. "Some cats died after a few days of showing symptoms."

The culprit? Ticks that carry and spread infectious diseases. These pesky parasites are a top health concern, along with other parasites, bacteria and viruses. The good news? Awareness of these threats can protect your cat's health throughout the season.

Ticks and the Other Four Primary Culprits

Below, Dr. Brousse shares the dangers of five health threats that could affect your kitty this spring:

Fleas

A recent survey revealed that 49 percent of participating veterinarians believe fleas are the top health danger of the spring. Multi-pet households beware: "Cats can get them from dogs, since dogs get walked outside and are more prone to catching them," says Dr. Brousse. Swift and minuscule, a flea can also jump off human clothes and latch onto your pet for months. With one flea producing about fifty eggs a day, the population multiplies quickly, spilling into the surrounding environment. Aside from causing irritation, fleas may also transmit fatal bacterial diseases, such as plague.

Bacterial and Viral Diseases

Feline plague, one of many painful bacterial diseases, is particularly insidious. Spread by rodent fleas, this disease may progress quickly if it isn't caught early. Symptoms include swollen glands and extreme exhaustion. Lyme disease, a more common bacterial disease, is transmitted by ticks. It can result in crippling arthritis and even permanent disability. Mosquitoes can transmit the West Nile Virus, a rare viral disease picked up from birds.

Ticks

In the warmer months, ticks can be a big problem for cats, especially in suburban areas. "Ticks come from deer and jump on cats' ears or perineum -- the area around the anus where there's no hair," Dr. Brousse explains. Slower-moving and larger in size, ticks attach themselves to cats and feed off their blood, spreading serious illnesses, like Cytosporidiosis or Lyme disease.

Mosquitoes

A mosquito bite can infect your cat with the West Nile Virus, but more commonly, with heartworms -- parasites that lodge themselves in a cat's lungs and heart and mature to up to six inches. "It only takes one or two worms to get into the cat and cause a problem," says Dr. Brousse. Symptoms include haphazard vomiting, a slight wheezing and even sudden death.

Allergies

Cats can develop allergies to air particles, just as humans do. "What we're going to see is allergic reactions to various pollens, especially in areas where you get really heavy blooms," predicts Dr. Brousse. Allergens include pollen, grass, weeds and even flea saliva. Cats sensitive to these irritants may itch and scratch severely, possibly causing hair loss and open sores that could lead to a bacterial infection.

Winning the Battle

Preventive action can help keep your cat safe this spring. Here are steps you can take:

- **Keep your cat indoors** Staying indoors decreases kitty's chances of catching diseased prey or being infected by fleas, ticks and mosquitoes.
- **Visit the veterinarian** "Take your cat in for a complete physical annually, or better yet, twice a year," advises Dr. Brousse. Your veterinarian will run important tests, such as an antibody test for heartworm, which can catch infections in their early stages.
- **Administer preventive medicine** A monthly heartworm and flea preventative, which comes in the form of a chewable tablet or liquid applied topically to the back of your cat's neck, can help maintain its health.
- **Check for flea dirt** Comb through your pet's coat with a flea comb. Dab the brush onto a white paper towel. Dark specks could be flea dirt, or dried pieces of blood. To be sure, spray the paper towel with water. Regular dirt will remain the same color; flea dirt will dissolve to red.
- **Check your pet daily for ticks** Gently massage your pet; if you feel a lump, part the coat to examine the area. Use a tick remover -- not pinchers, which can hurt your pet -- to remove the tick. Wrap the tick in a tissue and flush it. Disinfect the tick remover. If redness persists in the affected area, call your vet.
- **Clean your house and your pet often** Vacuuming is the No. 1 weapon against fleas, and an overall clean environment reduces cat allergens. If your cat suffers from allergies or parasites, bathing may relieve irritation and prevent scratching that could lead to disease.

It's better to err in the side of caution, advises Dr. Brousse. With proper care and vigilance, you and your pet can both enjoy the gifts of spring without worrying about its feline health threats.

About the Author: Natalia Macrynika is an assistant editor at Studio One Networks, which publishes The Daily Cat. This spring, she'll be keeping her feline roommate, Freddy, safe indoors.