

Ticks and mites: how to control and manage them

Together with fleas, ticks and mites are one of the most common problems affecting pets in the UK, says vet **Nicola Eisenhauer**. Some of these external parasites also carry human health implications, highlighted here where relevant



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TICKS

Unlike permanent parasites (eg mites), the tick is able to survive on and off the host at all stages of its life cycle, and will only climb onto the host to feed.

It is possible to distinguish between types of ticks based on their appearance and whether or not their development occurs on one or several species (different ticks require different hosts)

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UK SPECIES:

Common ticks are:

- *Ixodes ricinus* ('castor bean', European sheep tick);
- *Ixodes canisuga* (host-specific dog tick).

Less common ticks include:

- *Ixodes hexagonus* (hedgehog tick);
- *Haemaphysalis spp* (mainly found on cattle in Southern England);

- *Dermacentor spp* (rare – found in parts of Wales).

Clinical signs of ticks:

- Pet owners often notice a single engorged tick as a grey nodule attached to their animal.
- There may be many ticks attached at one time.
- Ticks do not tend to move through the animal's coat but attach soon after climbing onto the host.
- Common attachment sites are on the face, ears and abdomen where hair cover is relatively thin.

As the tick feeds, it increases in size (the female *Ixodes ricinus* can reach up to 10mm when fully engorged!)

PUBLIC HEALTH CONSIDERATIONS:

In many EU countries, travelling dogs are at risk from tick-transmitted diseases such as borreliosis, babesiosis and erlichiosis, all of which can be extremely debilitating.

Borreliosis, or 'Lyme Disease', is also a risk to dog in the UK. It can also affect humans and other mammals.

TREATMENT

Tick control is particularly important to travelling animals and those that live or frequently visit endemic areas of the UK (areas that are ideal tick habitats, such as woods and moorland).

If a tick is found on your dog, it should be removed as soon as possible using a

specially designed 'tick-hook'. It is important to remove the mouth parts intact, as they can cause an infection if left inside your pet.

Spot-on solutions which kill and repel ticks are also available for regular use and should be considered on an individual lifestyle basis.

MANGE

Sarcoptic mange is caused by the *Sarcoptes scabiei* mite. It is also known as 'fox mange' or 'scabies'. While it occurs relatively commonly in dogs, it is very rare in cats. It is also an important zoonotic disease with 'in contact' humans often developing lesions.

Clinical signs:

- Predisposed sites include the ear edges, muzzle, hocks and elbows, although severe infections can spread all over the body
- Severe itching
- Hair loss and skin crusting



TREATMENT

Traditionally, treatment involved weekly bathing with a suitable preparation but there are now more convenient skin spot-on solutions available.

OTHER MITES

Other mites that can affect pets include:

Demodex mites – these are long, cigar-shape mites found in hair follicles and sometimes sebaceous glands.

They are not infectious and are carried naturally by some individuals. They only cause a problem when the immune system of an animal isn't functioning properly.

Ear mites – infection with *Otodectes cynotis*. This mite does not burrow into the skin but confines itself to the external ear canal and inside of the ear flap. Signs include scratching, head shaking and brown, waxy discharge.

Harvest mites – a seasonal problem in the autumn, caused by the mite larvae *Neotrombicula autumnalis*. They attach to the host, often between the toes and around the ears, where they take a single blood feed before dropping off to continue the rest of their life cycle.

Some animals are highly allergic to the bite from harvest mites so require treatment with a suitable spray in order to remove them.

DIAGNOSIS

A presumptive diagnosis is often made on the basis of supportive history and clinical signs. As sarcoptic mange is highly infectious, it is rarely seen in an individual animal in a multi-pet household without other 'in-contact' pets (and humans) also being infected.

Exposure to foxes may increase the incidence of disease and epidemics can occur as a result of an outbreak in the local fox population.

A definitive diagnosis is only made by visualising the mites under a microscope by taking a skin scrape. However, due to the relatively protected location in which they live, it is not always possible to obtain a scrape deep enough reach the mites and a negative scrape isn't enough to rule out the disease.