

# Diseases from abroad – review and planning

Suitcases packed – check! Human passport – check! Pet passport – check! Let's go! Well, not so fast. Vet **Ursula Bollmann** of the Millcroft Veterinary Group runs through the risks



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The risks of the UK's pets suffering new disease threats are on the increase, mainly due to our desire to travel with our animal companions for holidays and show events.

The Pet Travel Scheme is the system that allows dogs, cats and ferrets to travel freely between countries belonging to the scheme, without the need for the animals to enter quarantine on returning to the UK, as long as their owner complied with the rules of the scheme.

Current Pet Travel Scheme rules have the protection of human health as the main objective, by keeping the UK free from rabies and a tapeworm (*Echinococcus*) that can be fatal to humans.

The health of the individual travelling pet is most definitely not ensured by compliance with these rules.

Unfortunately, many pet owners are unaware of this and it is up to veterinary healthcare advisers to keep pointing this out.

## RABIES IS RARE BUT...

Rabies is actually very rare, albeit widespread across the world. Compliance with the required vaccination of the Travel Scheme means that our pets should at least be protected from this awful disease.

However, it is still important to be vigilant.

On 23rd October 2013, two pups imported from

Bulgaria to the Netherlands, both micro-chipped and travelling with passports, tested positive for rabies. Preliminary reports are unclear on the validity of the passports and vaccination history.

Criminal activity (dog smuggling and falsified passports), vaccination during the incubation phase of the disease or vaccination failure must all be possibilities. Still, the risk of our pets catching rabies abroad is extremely low!

## BITING INSECTS

The diseases that are more common and that pose a much higher risk to pets, are transmitted by ticks and biting insects. These diseases are most common in the south of Europe. The risk of contracting them can be reduced by routine preventative treatments that are best started before travelling.

Ticks spread diseases like Babesiosis, Ehrlichiosis and Hepatozoonosis, all of which can cause serious illness, including fatal blood disorders. It is important to use a product that prevents ticks



check their dogs for ticks often (at least once a day) and must remove them immediately with a proper tick removal device such as a tick hook.

## SAND FLIES

Sand flies spread Leishmaniasis, a disease that can take months or years to develop, and that causes skin lesions and affect internal organs, causing a wasting syndrome. A vaccine is now available.

Permanent treatment of affected animals can control the disease, but usually does not cure it. This disease can also affect humans. Avoiding sandfly bites by keeping dogs in from one hour before dusk to one hour after dawn, and by using repellent products such as Advantix spot on or a Scalibor collar, is the only practical advice.

## HEARTWORM

Heartworm is a worm introduced into dogs' skin by mosquito bites. These worms migrate in the body and settle into the heart chambers where they grow and eventually cause heart failure. Treatment for infected animals is available but not risk-free.

The tapeworm *Echinococcus multilocularis* does not usually make dogs ill, but as a zoonosis it can cause human fatalities. By law dogs must be treated 24 to 120 hours before re-entry into the UK.

It should go without saying that travelling pets' yearly core vaccinations should also be kept up to date! Diseases,

**"The health of a travelling pet is not ensured by compliance with the Pet Travel Scheme"**

like distemper, which are now rarely encountered in the UK is more common in other countries.

The decision to take a pet abroad should be well thought through and thoroughly planned. A pre-travel consultation with a vet should be strongly recommended. This should be at least three weeks before travelling. This important check should include a discussion about the specific health risks in the countries to be visited, preventative treatments required and how and when to administer them, as well as a fitness to travel examination. It also gives the vet the opportunity to check that the rabies vaccination is up to date, the passport is in order and that the microchip works.

The veterinary profession can do a lot to minimise the risks of travel to our clients' pets and to leave them with happy holiday memories rather than long-term regrets. Ensure that your clients know that proper planning is key to returning with a healthy pet.

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attaching and kills them quickly. Spot-on treatments and drug-impregnated collars are examples.

Even with the best repellents, the occasional tick might attach. Owners should