



Could my pet have larval ticks?

By Dr Gretta Howard

Where do ticks come from?

The natural host of ticks are possums & bandicoots and hence ticks are endemic to the Sydney area. They have a year long life cycle, consisting of eggs, larvae, nymphs and adult paralysis ticks. The eggs are laid in the grass and scrub and when they hatch, the larvae wait for an animal to brush past and then jump on at the first opportunity.

After the larval ticks have fed, they jump off, turn into nymphs and wait for another unsuspecting victim to walk past to get another meal. Nymph ticks are slightly larger than the larvae and can cause clinical signs of paralysis in some animals. They are usually about 1-2 mm when engorged.

Once the nymph ticks have a feed from their temporary host, they jump off and form into adult paralysis ticks. These are prevalent from around September to March, so mainly the spring and summer months. Adult ticks can sometimes be found at other times of the year. Adult paralysis ticks can be fatal in cats and dogs and any pet with a tick present showing even mild signs eg vomiting, wobbly back legs or a

change in their bark or meow, should be treated by your veterinarian urgently as it does not take long before respiratory paralysis sets in.

Can larval or nymph ticks endanger my pet?

During the season of autumn, vets see many cases of dogs and cats presenting with a sudden onset of intense scratching, irritation or chewing of the body and the feet. These pin-head sized ticks are almost invisible to the naked eye so often a diagnosis needs to be confirmed by your vet under the microscope. Other times, little brown bumps can be seen on the skin if the fur is parted, but usually they can only be seen easily after a few days of feeding as the ticks enlarge.

It can be very uncomfortable for pets because as many as one hundred larval ticks may jump on and attach by burying their mouthparts into the skin. They feed on a blood meal for around seven days after which they promptly jump off and molt to the next stage of their life cycle, the nymph stage.

While larval and nymph ticks do not usually cause paralysis symptoms in adult dogs and cats, for kittens and puppies, they may become sick. So it is important to treat these larval ticks to rid your pet of the irritation as quickly as possible, particularly in younger animals. Usually your vet will either use a Frontline Spray (dogs and cats) or Permethrin tick rinse (dogs only) initially. If the reaction is really severe, anti-inflammatories will be needed either in the form of an injection or tablets.

So watch out for these little critters!!