

How to Spot and Treat Giardiasis in Pets

By Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

Hi, this is Dr. Karen Becker. Giardia is a one-celled parasite found not only in the small intestine of dogs and cats, but actually in most wild animals worldwide and many people in Third World countries.

There's much we don't know about the Giardia parasite. For example, we don't know exactly how many species there are or which ones affect animals. We also don't know everything about their life cycle, about the species that we've identified. It's thought that exposure to Giardia is common, but acquiring disease from the parasite is less common. Giardia is ubiquitous in the environment, meaning it's pretty much everywhere. You can find Giardia in rivers, in ponds, in puddles and lots of other places.

Giardia is a zoonotic disease, which means if your dog or cat has it or if another family member has it, the entire rest of the family, humans and animals, could be infected by the parasite. Puppy mills and other facilities that house a lot of dogs are actually breeding grounds for the spread of this parasite. Your pet can acquire Giardia by ingesting infected cysts in the poop or of course in the environment, contaminated water. Contamination can occur directly or indirectly through contact with infected cysts. Also, if the dog is Giardia-positive and licks his bum or his backside and then licks other dogs, cats, humans, anything, the potential for transmission is there.

The most common route of transmission is through feces-contaminated water. Once inside of a dog or cat's small intestine this cyst opens and releases the active form of the parasite into the animal's body. These forms move around and attach themselves to the walls of the intestine where they produce by dividing into, eventually, the active forms of the Giardia and cyst. Which means they build a cyst around the outside and then they're passed on the animal's body in the feces and that's how the cycle perpetuates itself. Those feces, then of course, once they're passed out of the animal, can contaminate water, grass, soil and other surfaces, especially cool, moist environments.

Most Giardia infections are asymptomatic, meaning there's no obvious symptoms that your pet is infected. When symptoms are present, the most common symptom is diarrhea, which can be acute or sudden or chronic or intermittent. Many people actually don't consult their veterinarian about their pet's soft, mushy stools because oftentimes with Giardia infection, it actually improves on its own after several days.

So, about the time you're ready to call the veterinarian because the stool is getting soft and gross, the stool actually firms up and all seems fine again. Stools can be great for a week or two, and then the soft stool starts again. So, it's this wax and wane, on and off diarrhea, that often time never gets bad enough that pet parents call the veterinarian.

So, many people will assume that this intermittent soft stool means that the dog or cat got into something or they just may have a little upset or that they ate something that didn't agree with

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them. So, so many times, Giardia cases go undiagnosed for years because the symptoms never get bad enough to actually create a crisis that takes the patient to the veterinarian. After a week, month, or sometimes years of undiagnosed Giardia infections, a Giardia-positive animal can actually experience an acute and very debilitating bout of bloody, dehydrating diarrhea.

Most pets with Giardia don't lose their appetite, but in chronic cases they can actually lose a lot of body weight. So animals are still eating, but they're getting thinner and thinner and thinner. This is because Giardia infection interferes with the digestion and absorption of nutrients in the diet. It can actually, also, damage the lining of the intestine.

In fact, this parasite is at the root of many cases of chronic GI (gastrointestinal) inflammation in dogs. And I would go so far as to say that many cases of underlying inflammatory bowel disease or dysbiosis could be caused by undiagnosed Giardia infection. Many of these patients have a history of being Giardia-positive as puppies or kittens, and they go on to have IBD (irritable bowel disease) as adults as well. I also see a number of pets with chronic diarrhea, malabsorption and other digestive issues who end up being Giardia positive. So, this is something that a lot of primary care veterinarians don't always check for.

The Giardia parasite is microscopic and it can't be seen with the naked eye. So, that's another issue. So, you can't assume because you don't see worms in the stool that your pet is Giardia negative, and unfortunately the standard parasite tests performed at most local veterinary clinics miss this pretty elusive parasite. In fact, estimates are that up to 30% of in-hospital fecal tests return a false negative, which means there's a lot of Giardia-positive animals running around that your vet has told you are negative when, really, they're hosting the parasite.

If you think your pet may have Giardia, I recommend you ask your veterinarian to send the stool sample, it's diagnosed via a fecal sample, to a commercial laboratory for analysis. And I recommend a specific test called an ELISA (enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay) or a PCR (polymerase chain reaction) test for the diagnosis of Giardia for any pet with a history of GI issues. A fecal ELISA or PCR test is preferable to the standard fecal flotation test at your vet because it checks for the presence of Giardia antigens. A standard fecal float only detects Giardia cyst, which may or may not be shed in the stool sample of the piece of poo that you brought in.

This is another reason why vets oftentimes will fail to diagnose the parasite early on. Is that the stool sample that you brought in didn't contain the parasite, but the next poo will, so it's kind of hit or miss. This means that the cysts, which are not shed in every fecal sample, there may be one or two poo samples where there's a positive and then five or six or seven stool samples where there's a negative.

So, you want to make sure to get ask your veterinarian if you think your pet could be Giardia-positive for a fecal antigen test that's sent to a commercial laboratory. Labs now offer what's called a diarrhea panel that actually checks for other common causes of diarrhea and this is a really good diagnostic choice for any dog or cat with intermittent GI issues to kind of make sure that you've tested for all of these elusive GI issues including Giardia.

If your pet has been diagnosed with Giardia, your vet will prescribe medication to hopefully

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eliminate the parasite. The Giardia parasite is becoming resistant to many anti-protozoal drugs, which means more and more pets are becoming persistent carriers of the infection. This means that even after you've given the medication and you've tracked the stool sample several times, that your dog or cat could still be positive. So, it's important that you continue checking to make sure that you get a negative. And this is also where things get a little tricky.

As I mentioned, the antigen test is the test that we use to diagnose the parasite and it checks for your pet's body's reaction to the parasite and can be positive actually for up to six months after treatment because it takes many, many months for your dog or cat's body to clear off these antigens out of the bloodstream after the parasites have died.

So, immediately after Giardia treatment, I recommend that your veterinarian run a fecal float test once a month for three to four months to make sure that that's negative, followed by an antigen test to make sure that the infection's fully resolved. Initially after treatment, monthly fecal floats will give you and your veterinarian a good guess as to whether the infection has been successfully cleared.

The reason for repeated fecal floats post-treatment is again, because cysts aren't always passed in every stool sample, you may get one or two fecal samples that are negative, but if your pet is persistently infected or if the treatment didn't work, your pet could still be positive and you are assuming is negative when he's not. I know this is very complicated, a little bit like the organism itself, but it's important to do the serial testing after treatment so that you know in your heart that the infection's been cleared.

I've had so many pet lovers tell me that they were fooled into thinking that their pet's infection was gone when really it wasn't. So, this is really the very best strategy to make sure that your pet has cleared the infection.

Now, I tried many natural protocols to eliminate Giardia without the use of drugs, and while I've had some success using combinations of things like berberine, which is Oregon grape root, ginger, cinnamon, black walnut, olive leaf, cat's claw, Pau d'arco, a bunch of great anti-parasitic herbs. I have found these substances to do a great job at reducing the parasitic load, the Giardia load in dogs and cats, but it doesn't always cure the animals.

So, I actually have come to expect recurrence after only natural treatment has been instituted. If you choose to treat your pet all naturally, I recommend that you extend your intermittent stool checks to nine months because I most commonly see a recurrence of cysts between the six- and nine-month mark when you think your dog or cat's negative on natural treatment and they really aren't.

Once your pet has been officially cleared of the parasite, I strongly recommend that you partner with a functional medicine veterinarian who can provide an intestinal recuperation plan. I have a lot of articles and videos on the Healthy Pets' site discussing leaky gut and dysbiosis as well. If you're unfamiliar with what that term means, a repair protocol ensures that your Giardia-positive pet will not have long-term consequences from this parasite's damaging effects. Giardia creates a lot of inflammation in the GI tract and we want to address that.

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Preventing Giardia infections from occurring involves being aware of several predisposing factors including kenneling your pet with a bunch of other animals with unknown parasitic status, picking up your own dog's poop outside and avoid walking your dog in other areas where animals have pooped. As much as possible, prevent your pet from drinking water from outdoor sources. That's probably the No. 1 source of contamination. And most importantly, check a fecal sample through your vet's diagnostic lab twice a year. This will help identify and treat parasitic infections before they have a chance to cause a tremendous amount of GI inflammation, which is what Giardia does.

On a side note, I don't recommend automatically deworming animals. There isn't a universal dewormer that kills every parasite imaginable. So, there isn't one dewormer that will get Giardia, roundworm, hookworm, tapeworm, coccidia. So, if you can't give your pets a pill that will take care of all of these parasites, there's no reason to give five or six different dewormers and kind of shoot in the dark.

So, I guess the key is don't just assume that your pet has one parasite and offer some unnecessary dewormer. No drug is entirely safe, and giving three to four different dewormers twice a year isn't a good approach either. So, I'm not a big fan of medicating animals "just in case." But along that same vein, I also don't recommend only checking a fecal sample when your pet has symptoms. So, checking a fecal sample prior to administering the appropriate dewormer is a really good common-sense approach.

I also don't recommend the routine use of natural dewormers "just in case." And you'll have people say that, "Oh, I just deworm my pet twice a year." I've seen many cases of significant inflammation caused by unnecessary doses of strong dewormers, natural or herbal, that were totally unnecessary because the animal had no parasitic infection. It's almost never a good idea, in my opinion, to give a drug or natural remedy "just in case." So, the common sense, more responsible way to handle parasites in pets is to proactively test your dog or cat feces on a regular basis to be sure your pet is negative for parasites.