



## COCCIDIOSIS

### What is coccidiosis?

Coccidiosis is an infection with a one-celled organism; these organisms are classified as protozoa and are called coccidia. Coccidia are not worms; they are microscopic parasites which live within cells of the intestinal lining. Because they live in the intestinal tract they can be associated with diarrhoea problems especially in puppies. These should not be confused with worms. Diarrhoea due to coccidiosis is occasionally a problem in Britain but the coccidia are usually associated with another causal organism.

### How did my dog become infected with coccidia?

Oocysts (immature coccidia) are passed in the faeces of the dog. They remain in the environment and eventually sporulate (mature) into a more developed oocyst which can infect the dog again. Other dogs, cats, or mice may also become infected. This process can occur in as little as 6 hours, but it usually takes 7-10 days. If the sporulated oocysts are swallowed, they mature in the dog's intestine to complete the life cycle. If the oocysts should be swallowed by a mouse, the dog may also become infected by eating the mouse.

### What kinds of problems are caused by coccidial infection?

Most dogs that are infected with coccidia do not have diarrhoea or any other clinical signs. When the eggs (oocysts) are found in the faeces of a dog without diarrhoea, they are generally considered a transient, insignificant finding. However, in puppies and debilitated adult dogs, they may cause severe, watery diarrhoea, dehydration, abdominal distress, and

vomiting. In severe cases, death may occur although this is not common in our country.

### **How is coccidial infection diagnosed?**

Coccidiosis is diagnosed by performing a microscopic examination of a faeces sample. Since the oocysts are much smaller than the eggs of the intestinal worms, a very careful study must be made. Infection with some of the less common coccidial parasites is diagnosed with a blood test.

### **How is the coccidial infection treated?**

The most common drug used to eliminate coccidia is a sulphonamide antimicrobial drug. It is given for 10-14 days. Other drugs are also used if diarrhoea and dehydration occur. If the sulpha type drug is not effective, others are available. Reinfection of dogs is common so environmental disinfection is important. The use of chlorine bleach, one cup in a gallon of water (500 mL in 4 litres), is effective if the surfaces and premises can be safely treated with it.

### **Are the coccidial parasites of my dog infectious to humans?**

The most common coccidia found in dogs do not have any affect on humans. However, less common types of coccidia are potentially infectious to humans. Coccidial parasites pose a health risk for immunosuppressed humans (i.e., AIDS patients, those taking immune suppressing drugs, cancer patients, the elderly). Good hygiene and proper disposal of dog faeces are important in minimising risk of transmission of all canine parasites to humans. Although there is risk of the dog transmitting parasites to humans it does not warrant removing the dog from the household except in very rare circumstances.