

PARALYSIS TICK INFORMATION SHEET – Canine & Feline

The female paralysis tick, *Ixodes holocyclus*, is found along the eastern coast of Australia and causes tick poisoning. It is more prevalent in the bushy, seaside areas where there is an abundance of its natural hosts, the bandicoot and possum. The paralysis tick is very sensitive to climatic changes and so the life cycle slows down in cold and dry weather, and accelerates very rapidly in warm, humid weather. **Thus, in Sydney the worst time for ticks is between September and February**, but it is important to remember that they are present all through the year and their incidence is climatically controlled.

The life cycle of the tick consists of the adult laying eggs that hatch into tiny pinhead size larvae. These larvae attach themselves to a suitable animal (the host), suck blood, fall off when full, moult and develop into a nymph. The nymph, like the larvae then repeats the process and finally develops into the adult tick. The adult then attaches itself to a host, feeds until engorged, falls off and lays 2000 to 3000 eggs, which hatch into larvae and so complete the life cycle.

The paralysis toxin which the tick produces comes from the salivary glands of the adult female tick and paralysis occurs progressively, that is, the more engorged the tick, the more toxin it produces which in turn produces more paralysis.

To our dogs and cats, the all too often result of tick paralysis is an untimely and uncomfortable death. So let us speak firstly of **prevention**. By far the best, if not the only means of prevention is to **search your pet daily**; that is running your fingers over every square inch of its body. Pay particular attention to the head, neck, shoulders and forelimbs but not forgetting between the toes, in the ears and even inside the mouth. **Ticks can be found anywhere on your pet - SO BE VIGILANT!** Ticks, even large ones are easily missed so the more members of your family that can spare the time to go over your pet the better. Products such as Frontline (cats and dogs) or Advantix (only to be used in dogs as very toxic to cats) do help if used every 2 weeks. Permethrin rinse, which is used weekly can also repel ticks but again is only to be used on dogs as is toxic to cats. While use of these products does help there is unfortunately no guarantee. For this reason we highly recommend daily searching of your pet. Also, if your pet has a long or thick coat, having them **clipped short for the summer months** makes searching for ticks that much easier.

Let us suppose you have found a tick on your pet (remember if one is found always look for more). Do not start dabbing at it with methylated spirits, kerosene etc.- all that is going to do is further irritate the tick and burn the animal's skin as well. Grab the tick firmly at the point of attachment next to the skin with your fingers or a pair of tweezers and pull the tick out. **If the body of the tick breaks off** leaving the head behind imbedded in the skin, don't worry, the tick has been killed and there will only be a slightly prolonged irritation at the site of attachment.

This is another time for close observation. If your pet is **not showing any symptoms** (remember symptoms can occur for up to four days after you have removed the tick), **keep him cool, quiet** and for the first eight hours withhold food, water and any medication.

If your pet develops any of the following symptoms:

- Wobbly or weak hind legs
- Lethargy;
- Vomiting or retching
- Change in the sound of the voice;
- Coughing or distressed breathing -

CONTACT YOUR VETERINARIAN NOW!!!

No vet will mind a phone call. Let them ascertain the extent of the poisoning and whether you should bring your pet in for treatment. It is far better to err on the early side, apart from the fact that your pet stands a **much better chance of survival**. The cost of tick serum is expensive and advanced cases need a lot of other supportive therapy as well.

At this point it may be as well to explain why there is **emphasis on keeping your pet cool and quiet**. As the tick poison circulates through the body, there is a gradual paralysis, starting with the rear legs and moving forward. If your pet becomes upset, too hot or you take him for a walk just to see if he becomes wobbly, you will aggravate his condition. This causes more distress and exhaustion, which in turn further aggravates his problems. If you have to transport him to the vet, be calm, re-assure your pet, keep him cool, restrain him gently and generally keep him as quiet as possible.

Most animals die of paralysis of the respiratory muscles, hence the emphasis on helping the breathing. However some animals die from a **tick toxin induced pneumonia**, which can be caused by two things. One is exposure. Cats have a nasty habit of crawling off somewhere when they are ill. It rains during the night, the paralysis worsens and without shelter your pet is severely stressed by chilling, leading to pneumonia. The second cause is the reason **why food and water must be withheld if you suspect tick poisoning**: as the larynx is not operating as it should be due to the tick poisoning, the chances of stomach contents being vomited up and inhaled into the lungs by accident is a very real risk. When this happens a bacterial infection usually occurs and - pneumonia again.

To finish up, here are a few answers to some commonly asked questions:

- ❖ No breed or crossbreed of dog or cat is more immune than any other is. All are equally susceptible
- ❖ The age of the animal does not make any difference; all are equally vulnerable. However, the young and the elderly do have a higher mortality rate
- ❖ At the beginning of the season, ticks do appear to have greater toxicity; therefore the death rate is higher.

Toward the end of the summer months as you continue to remove ticks from your pets, it is possible that they may have built up some immunity- **but don't rely on it!** Immunity will lapse during the winter months when there are few ticks about, leaving your pet just as vulnerable when the new tick season starts.

The tick season is from September to April