

FELINE COCCIDIOSIS

What is coccidiosis?

Coccidiosis is an intestinal tract infection caused by a one-celled organism or protozoa called coccidia. Coccidia are not parasitic worms. They are microscopic parasites that live within cells of the intestinal lining. Because they live in the intestinal tract and commonly cause diarrhea, they are often confused with worms.

How did my cat become infected with coccidia?

Oocysts or immature coccidia are passed in the stool of the cat. They lie in the environment and eventually sporulate and mature into a more developed oocyst that can infect the cat again. Other cats, dogs, or mice may also become infected. This process can occur in as little as six hours, but it usually takes seven to ten days. If the sporulated oocysts are swallowed, they mature in the cat's intestine to complete the life cycle. If a mouse should swallow the oocysts, the cat may also become infected if it eats an infected mouse.

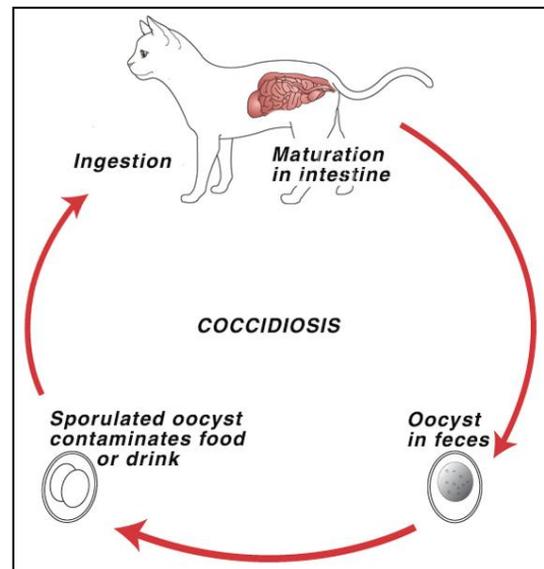
What are the clinical signs of coccidiosis?

Most cats that are infected with coccidia do not have diarrhea or any other clinical signs. When the eggs or oocysts are found in the stool of a cat without diarrhea, they are generally considered a transient, insignificant finding. However, in kittens and debilitated adult cats, they may cause severe, watery diarrhea, dehydration, abdominal distress, and vomiting. In severe cases, death may occur.

How is coccidiosis diagnosed?

Coccidiosis is diagnosed by performing a microscopic examination of a stool 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 may be diagnosed with a blood test.



How is coccidiosis treated?

The most common drug used to eliminate coccidia is a sulfa-type antibiotic. It is typically administered for ten to fourteen days. The medication is sweet tasting and most cats will take it with little difficulty. If the sulfa-type drug is not effective, other treatments are available. Additional medication may be needed if diarrhea and dehydration occur. Reinfection of cats is common so environmental disinfection is important. The use of diluted chlorine bleach [one cup (250 ml) of bleach mixed in one gallon (3.8 L) of water] is effective if the surfaces and premises can be safely treated with it.

Are the coccidial parasites of my cat infectious to humans?

The most common coccidia found in cats do not have any affect on humans. However, less common types of coccidia are potentially infectious to humans. One parasite, called *Cryptosporidium*, may be carried by cats or dogs and transmitted to people. This parasite has also been found in public water supplies in some major cities. Another coccidial organism, *Toxoplasma*, is of particular concern to pregnant women because of the potential to cause birth defects in newborns. These two coccidial parasites pose an increased health risk for

immunosuppressed humans (i.e., AIDS patients, those taking immune suppressant drugs, cancer patients, etc.). Good hygiene and proper disposal of cat feces are important in minimizing risk of transmission of all feline parasites to humans. Although there is risk of the cat transmitting these two particular parasites to humans, it does not warrant removing the cat from the household except in very rare instances.



Material written by Ernest Ward, DVM
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