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Tick, Tick, Tick...

By Mona Miller, DVM



Dr. Mona S. Miller lives in Lafayette with her 4 year old son, yellow Labrador Retriever and grey cat. She has worked at Four Seasons Animal Hospital in Lafayette since moving here in 2001. She attended Cal as an undergrad, and received her DVM from U. C. Davis. She can be reached at Four Seasons, 938-7700, or by email to MonaSDVM@aol.com.

is still a stretch to say "ticks are good." Not all ticks harbor the disease-causing bacteria; in fact according to the Contra Costa County Mosquito and Vector Control website (<http://www.ccmvcd.dst.ca.us/>), only 1-2% of adult Western Black-Legged ticks are infected with *Borrelia* bacteria that can cause Lyme Disease. It takes at least 24 hours of tick attachment/blood meal for the bacteria to be transmitted to the mammal. And finally, as mentioned above, many individuals have been exposed to *Borrelia* bacteria, yet do not develop Lyme Disease.

The best prevention of tick-borne diseases is prevention or minimal time of attachment. This can be achieved through keeping your dog on trail, away from the long grasses; checking your dog carefully for ticks immediately after a romp in an open space AND daily at the same time of day; tick prevention pesticides such as tick collars (I particularly like the Preventic collar - ask your veterinarian about this!) or topical spot-ons such as Frontline or Advantix. High quality flea/tick products, used appropriate for the species and body weight, have minimal to no side effects.

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I have a running discussion with a friend, a Registered Veterinary Technician with whom I work, about whether ticks "serve any good purpose." I suppose the answer depends on whether you are the tick or the bacteria hidden inside, or the recipient of the tick bite. Ticks are prevalent in all of California; there are three species of ticks in Contra Costa County that can be worrisome. In our area ticks are a year-round problem, although there is a seasonal increase from November through April. Ticks do not jump, hop or fly. They walk up a stem of tall grass or bush, wait for heat to pass by in the form of a warm mammal and then simply hitch a ride as they attach and take their blood meal.

A tick bite itself can cause a local area of skin and tissue inflammation that may require treatment. Generally, however, the site of tick attachment is not a problem. When removing the tick it is important to grasp it firmly by the head, even if it is burrowed in, and remove it from the skin to prevent inflammation. This can be accomplished with tweezers, or a nifty little device called "ProTick" puller. Using alcohol or a lighted match will definitely cause a skin reaction!

More problematic than the tick bite is the potential for the tick to transmit harmful bacteria during its meal. These bacterial infections are responsible for diseases such as Lyme Disease, Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever or Anaplasmosis, all of which can be found in low-level in our area. Tick-borne diseases are thought to become severe with both the presence of the causative bacteria AND the individual human/dog/cat's immune system response. Many individuals can test positive with antibody tests, indicating prior or current exposure, yet never develop symptoms of illness. This is comparable to H1N1 virus infection - many people do not become sick, some people experience mild flu-like symptoms, and a small handful develop serious disease. In my next article, I will discuss tick-borne diseases more fully.

There are some good points to know in considering ticks, although it