Infection Series
Dermatophytosis, “Ringworm”

Ringworm is a contagious fungal infection seen in people, cats, dogs, horses & other animals.

Kittens are commonly affected so make sure this has been checked prior to adoption!

Treatment involves a combination of topical therapy, oral antifungal medicines & environmental treatment.

How is ringworm spread?

These fungi live on the hair shafts and superficial areas of the skin where they form infective arthrospores. These arthrospores are shed into the environment where they can last for months to years. The arthrospores remain inactive until the a proper environment develops (warm, humid conditions)- broken or macerated skin is perfect! These arthrospores DO NOT invade normal, intact, dry skin.
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Prevention and early diagnosis of ringworm is the best approach!

- When adopting a new pet (especially a cat) from an animal shelter, rescue group or pet store have your veterinarian perform a toothbrush culture (screening culture) as part of the exam. This will help to ensure that your are not bringing ringworm into your household.
- Always wash your hands after handling your pet, its bedding, toys and other articles.

How is ringworm diagnosed?

- Fungal culture is the best way to diagnose (results take 2-3 weeks). This is especially important since some animals are “carriers” of ringworm- they can spread the infection but have no obvious clinical lesions. In these cases “screening” cultures are required.
- Wood’s lamp examination can be a helpful screening tool if the strain of ringworm is fluorescent but because of the high false negative rate does not replace culture.
- Skin biopsy can a be helpful & a more rapid tool in some cases.

If I have been diagnosed with ringworm, should I test my pets?

- YES- please contact your veterinarian. All animals should have screening ringworm cultures (termed “toothbrush” cultures) performed to make sure that none of the pets in the household are ringworm carriers.

How is ringworm treated in cats & dogs?

- Treatment must involve eliminating the infection from the pet/person along with cleaning the environment.
- Ideally, affected animals should be isolated from other pets in the household.
- Topical therapy with weekly lime sulfur dips is preferred over simple “spot treatment” because the infection extends beyond the lesion that you see and a dip provides better coverage. In addition, dipping helps to decrease environmental contamination by infected hairs.
- Lime sulfur dips are most effective. Yes- the dip smells (like rotten eggs or perm solution) yet is highly effective!
- Systemic antifungal therapy is often also needed. Medications most often used include: itraconazole, fluconazole and terbinafine. While griseofulvin was used in the past- it is no longer recommended due to serious side effects that can occur in the cat).
- Fungal vaccines have shown little efficacy in controlling ringworm.
- Treatment must be continued until there is clinical cure (no lesions!) AND mycological cure (2 negative fungal cultures taken 1-2 weeks apart).
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Environmental decontamination… cleaning your house or kennel!

- Dust all surfaces and ledges with a disposable dusting cloth (e.g. Swiffer).
- All bedding, brushes, combs, rugs, cages, etc. should be vacuumed and scrubbed with hot water and detergent. This should be followed by application of an effective disinfectant (see below). It is best to discard any items that cannot be thoroughly disinfected.
- Walls, floors, lamps, etc. should be scrubbed and cleaned in a similar manner.
- Ideally use a wet-dry vacuum to remove any dirty water after cleaning.
- Ensure sufficient contact time with disinfectant for all surfaces (e.g. at least 10 minutes for bleach).
- Wear appropriate protective clothing (e.g. gloves, eyewear) and ensure the room is well ventilated during disinfection. Ideally place a fan by a window to blow air out of the room to the outdoors.
- Use a disposable mop pad to clean non-porous surfaces in high-traffic rooms.
- Carpetered areas may be impossible to effectively decontaminate. If possible, remove the carpet and either wash it in hot water and bleach, or discard it. Otherwise, frequent vacuuming with immediate disposal of the collection bag is necessary. However, regular vacuuming may actually spread fungus further around a room. To avoid this, use only vacuums equipped with a HEPA filter, steam cleaning or a central vacuum unit.
- Vehicle interiors should be decontaminated as much as possible in a similar manner.
- Curtains can be dry-cleaned at a professional cleaner.
- Clean all heating vents, and install a good-quality furnace filter. The filter should be changed according to the manufacturer’s recommendations, and at the very end of the decontamination process. Ideally, do not keep infected animals in a room with a cold air return.
- Avoid blowing air from heavily contaminated rooms to other parts of the house. If fans are used to improve air circulation, they should be pointed to blow air outside. Use a dehumidifier to reduce the humidity in heavily contaminated rooms.
- Mopping/vacuuming and dusting in heavily contaminated rooms should be done daily, and disinfection should be done at least weekly. In other rooms, cleaning and disinfection should be repeated at least once every 4-6 weeks (the more often, the better) until all affected animals and people have eliminated the fungal infection.

Household bleach (1:10 to 1:100 solution in water) is the preferred disinfectant as it is cheap and readily available.

For additional information: check out www.wormsandgermsblog.com