TICK POISONING

A good tick is a dead tick!

Every year dogs and cats in this part of Brisbane die from tick paralysis. Ticks breed in high grass, bushland and parks and are spread by possums, bandicoots and other native animals. The months of highest risk are July-January.

What does a tick look like? When they first attach ticks are very small and dark brown – as they grow larger from sucking blood they become a light grey/green colour. After 2-3 days they grow rapidly to 5mm-1cm in size and the pet starts to show symptoms.

Signs of tick paralysis

Seek veterinary attention immediately – tick paralysis is life threatening!!

- Slightly weak in the back legs
- Looks like a drunken sailor – unable to stand properly on the back legs
- Cannot stand at all on the back legs
- Change in voice (bark or meow)
- Unable to swallow properly – may dribble water or food or cough/gag
- Change in breathing patterns. THIS MAY BE THE ONLY SIGN. Cats often only show this sign.
- Beware – this is the most life threatening sign.
- Vomiting
- Depressed, slower, disinterested, decreased exercise tolerance
- More unusual signs – lame in one leg (tick under armpit) or facial signs (droopy lip or eye or ear)

Oh no – I’ve found a tick!

Latest research shows no increase in the seriousness of signs if the tick is pulled off immediately it is found, compared to if it is coated with insecticide and left to die. Use tweezers or a tick hook. Don’t worry if you ‘leave the head in’ – no harm - it will come out in a few days just like a splinter. Do NOT use kerosene or anything else on the tick that will burn the skin of your pet. Telephone us for more information, bring the tick in for identification, or come in to see pictures to help you differentiate the paralysis tick from other common ticks.
REMEMBER that animals can show symptoms of tick poisoning 24-48 hours after a tick has been killed – keep them cool and quiet after finding a tick and watch diligently for any signs as above. **If your animal is showing any signs of tick poisoning it will need veterinary attention as soon as possible!! The sooner treatment is started, the better the chance of survival and the lower the costs involved!!**

Tick paralysis prevention

**Nb.** No form of prevention can 100% guarantee freedom from tick paralysis as the immunity of the pet, number of ticks and individual tick toxicity are always highly variable factors.

- **BAYER ‘KILTIX’ COLLAR** – active ingredient Flumethrin – replace each 5-6 weeks. *Avoid supermarket collars with Amitraz – they just don’t work!!*
- ‘Advantix’ Spot On applied every two weeks. *(DO NOT use on cats – poisonous!)*
- ‘Frontline Top Spot’ applied every two weeks.

**THE MOST IMPORTANT PREVENTION** is to check your pet over daily by feeling over its skin for ticks. Most ticks are found forward of the shoulder – head, ears, under lips, under chin, around eyes, chest – but they will attach anywhere (always check between the toes!!). Feel over your **whole** pet’s body with your fingers!!

**TREATMENT FOR TICK PARALYSIS**

Treatment involves the use of tick antivenom. This treatment works best if given before the toxin has had time to bind to the muscle. If treatment is commenced too late it may not work in time to save your pet. Antivenom can only be produced by a long, costly process and so is expensive.

**TREATMENT**

This varies depending on the stage of paralysis that the pet is in on presentation but generally involves:

- A 1-5 day stay in hospital whilst receiving treatment and recovering
- Placement of an intravenous catheter through which to give medications
- Sedation to decrease the effect of the tick toxin
- Use of medications to inhibit vomiting and clear any fluid from the lungs
- Intravenous Tick Antiserum
- Very close observation to identify complications, including heart problems or aspiration pneumonia - these are the usual causes of fatalities in cases of tick paralysis
- No food or water until able to swallow properly – aspiration pneumonia is a possible complication
- Supportive treatments until able to eat, drink, urinate and defecate properly. Then the pet can go home
COMPLICATIONS
In addition to paralysis of the limbs, the muscles of the throat and heart are affected. Dogs and cats can vomit; develop severe life-threatening pulmonary oedema and also secondary pneumonia and megaoesophagus. All of these must be taken into account and managed while in hospital. Some pets will show temporary facial nerve paralysis if a tick is attached to the head – they will need regular eye drops until the blink reflex returns, which can take some weeks.

COST OF TREATMENT
Treatment costs vary greatly depending on the size of the animal, severity of toxicity and the various complications which can occur. Your veterinarian will give you an estimate of the first day’s costs and will update you daily on the total of your account.

AFTER CARE
The tick toxin affects the nervous system so the more your pet runs around, gets excited and its body temperature increases, the greater the effects of the poisoning. Therefore:
Do not exercise your pet for 3-4 weeks – very gentle, short walks in the cool periods of the day only.
Animals are known to collapse with another episode of paralysis or a heart attack from overzealous exercise without the attachment of another tick!

Keep your pet at a comfortable temperature – no sitting in the sun and avoid heat stress at all costs! A nice cool position in a bathroom, under the house or even in an air-conditioned room is ideal.

Practice regular and diligent tick prevention as the chances of your pet recovering from a second episode of paralysis soon after the first are greatly reduced!

Remember – the tick toxin has a direct effect on your pet’s heart which is not reversed by treatment and hospitalisation – this can lead to dysrhythmias and sudden heart attacks – your pet must be kept very quiet for at least 3-4 weeks after treatment to reduce the chance of this happening.

IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS, PLEASE DO NOT HESITATE TO CONTACT US!