

# Pet worm and flea treatments – is it time to reconsider?



IMAGE: NICK RIDLEY



Vet **MARK ELLIOTT** reports routine chemical medication of cats and dogs is causing unnecessary damage to the environment.

**O**ur dogs are important to us, and yet strangely we are applying ever more toxic chemicals to them in the form of pesticides and wormers. And we are doing this ever more frequently with (until recently) very little concern being raised about the short or long-term effects on man, beast and the environment – each individually a concern, together a catastrophe in the making.

Many of the products used on dogs contain controversial chemicals called Neonicotinoids – in particular Imidacloprid. It has been estimated that just one application of this chemical to treat a Labrador contains enough toxin to kill 60 million bees!

A report by BUGLIFE on Neonicotinoid Insecticides in British Freshwaters specifically implicated veterinary topical applications and flea collars as the most likely source of pollution in some

catchment areas. Imidacloprid is highly toxic on an acute basis to aquatic invertebrates. Neonicotinoids are persistent, stable and long-lasting in the environment. BUGLIFE recommended their use should immediately be suspended in the UK.

To honey bees Imidacloprid is perhaps the most toxic chemical ever invented. At sub-lethal levels it increases honey bee susceptibility to disease, causes significant loss in the number of queens produced, and doubles the number of bees who failed to return from food foraging trips. It is also highly toxic to some bird species including the house sparrow. Where are they now? Birds exposed to these chemicals become disorientated, lose their sense of direction, become unable to migrate.

The UK Veterinary Medicines Directorate recently published an open call for research into the problems, and the Veterinary Record highlighted “the process for authorising these products may not have taken into account their environmental impacts”.

In Norway and Denmark vets don't routinely worm dogs other than pups and nursing bitches, as it is accepted there is no need. Prescriptions for pesticides must follow a positive diagnosis of infection and there is greater awareness of environmental concerns from use of these products, as well as the human health risks. Are our parasite problems so different to those countries? No.

Yet in the UK we are told we must encourage regular worming of adult pets for roundworms and tapeworms due to the risks to pet and human health. This is just not a sustainable or even an evidence-based argument.

Worming only treats the current infestation. After just a few days new infestations establish as the eggs and infective forms of these parasites are pretty much endemic in the environment. Within only a few weeks of worming eggs are again being shed. For all the worming of cats and dogs done it is reported that 34 million toxocara eggs are released per square kilometre per day in UK.

An example of where the human health argument fails is linking dog ownership with exposure to the dog roundworm and the risk of its causing blindness in



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children. A very large study in Ireland failed to show the link. Personal hygiene was shown as the way forward as toxacara eggs only become infective in the external environment and contaminated food/pica/infected water sources are actually the main routes to human infection.

With ticks the main concern is Lyme disease. But dogs don't give people the disease - that will only happen if the owner is bitten by an infected tick - and there are plenty of precautions we can take against this.

Products marketed on exploiting fears often come unstuck when facts are interrogated. Consider Canine Lungworm; Despite marketing that seeks to strike fear into our hearts that many dogs are dying a terrible death, and the only solution is to smother them in chemicals, infection is currently uncommon. Reportedly around 24 dogs die annually of lungworm, compared to nearly 100,000 that are run over. Training and buying a collar could be far better investments than a pack of toxic chemicals with all the risks they bring.

And anyway the main source of lungworm spread is the urban fox. Data

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shows infection rates of foxes at around 18 per cent (50 per cent in the south east). Without resolving this problem we cannot hope to counter the disease.

In my opinion, just regularly monitor

your pet for infection with faeces sampling, and for ticks and fleas use close observation. There are some very good companies that will check the faeces for you. Treat when necessary only.

For ticks, in a high-risk area use the very effective collars that act both as insecticide and repellent, but take these off on walks where the dog may go into water.

Human risks from pet parasites are arguably manageable by good personal hygiene. Human risks and risks for the environment from chemicals are best managed by using them only when absolutely necessary.

For a more detailed parallel article - Pesticide - see my website [www.markelliott.co.uk](http://www.markelliott.co.uk)

Mark Elliott BVSc VetMFGom MRCVS, is well-known to many in the shooting community as a vet specialising in gamebirds, for his involvement in wildlife research and as a joint winner of the 2008 Purdey Award for Game and Conservation. However, the larger part of his career has been, and still is in the winter, the treatment of dogs and cats. Mark will be writing on both dogs and gamebird health for Shooting and Conservation. His practice websites, where occasional articles of interest are added, are [www.markelliott.co.uk](http://www.markelliott.co.uk) and [www.southdownsvets.co.uk](http://www.southdownsvets.co.uk).