

## BABESIOSIS – tick-borne parasite in dogs

### New tick-borne disease in dogs, canine babesiosis, found in the UK

There have been recent reports of *Babesia canis* (*B. canis*), a tick-borne parasite, diagnosed in four dogs in Essex.

This is especially notable in that the cases occurred in a small number of dogs who had **not travelled outside the UK** – up to now, the only cases seen in the UK are in dogs which have travelled overseas.

In addition, the tick which carries this disease, *Dermacentor reticularis* *B. canis* is a parasite that lives inside red blood cells and symptoms of the disease are associated with loss of red blood cells. The disease is known as **Babesiosis** and has a wide range of clinical signs.

Some dogs may be asymptomatic carriers – in other words they show no noticeable signs. The signs seen can vary and range from mild to acute, and may in some cases be fatal.

The symptoms include:

- lethargy
- weakness
- anorexia (off food)
- pale gums
- jaundice (yellow gums)
- weight loss
- enlarged abdomen
- fever
- anaemia

### Diagnosis

Diagnosis is confirmed by a simple blood test and treatment is possible, depending on how severe the symptoms are. Clinical improvement is normally seen within 24–48 hours of starting treatment, although sometimes a blood transfusion might be necessary.

Treatment may not completely eliminate the parasite and dogs can become chronic long term carriers, which means the disease may recur if affected dogs receive immunosuppressive treatment or have other illness.

## Prevention

The *tick season* now seems to be all year round because of the milder winters - we are regularly seeing ticks throughout the winter months.

Use of an effective anti-tick product which kills ticks within 24 hours of attaching is paramount in preventing disease transmission (the tick needs to be killed within 24 hours of attaching to a host).

At Hillside Vets, we recommend using **Bravecto™**- a safe, effective, palatable tablet which kills ticks rapidly, within 12 hours, and lasts for three months.

Please note – if you are travelling to the EU with your dog you should use Bravecto every eight weeks because of diseases carried by the brown tick - *Rhipicephalus*.

Try to avoid areas of known tick infestation, particularly in warmer months. After walking you should always check your dog for ticks.

## Detecting ticks

Check your pets's skin on its head first (around the mouth and ears, behind ears and on its neck), then work your way down its forelegs and the rest of its body, searching for any lumps on the skin surface.



## If you find a lump:

- Part your pet's hair and look at it more closely (with the help of a magnifying glass, if necessary).
- The place where the tick attaches may or may not be painful and there may be skin swelling - it is distinguished from other skin swellings and growths because close scrutiny can reveal the tick's legs at the level of the skin.

## What to do if you find a tick

When attempting to remove a tick, avoid handling the parasite directly.

If you find a tick on your pet's skin:

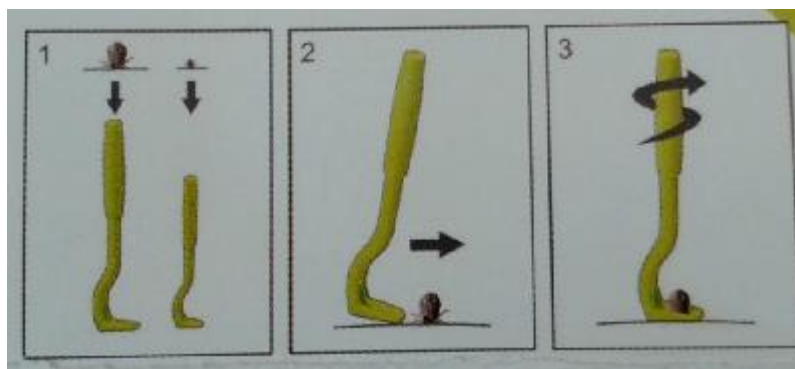
- The aim is to remove the whole tick, including its mouthparts without squeezing the tick's body.

- Use a specially designed tick hook (available to purchase from our Reception) with a narrow slot that traps the tick's mouthparts. The hooks come in two sizes depending on the size of the tick.
- Slide the hook under the tick at skin level so as to grip the head of the tick, ensure that the hook is not entangled
- Twist the hook gently in one direction – this will make the tick unhook its mouthpart.
- Dispose of the tick so it cannot re-attach or lay eggs.

**Do not** attempt to burn, cut or pull the tick off with your fingers.

We recommend keeping several tick hooks available – in your car as well as your pet first aid box.

If you have any concerns about your pet and ticks, please book an appointment with us. You can call us 01202 698899.



### Further information from MSD Animal Health, March 2016

Launched last year, the *Big Tick Project* has become the largest-ever veterinary study of ticks and tick-borne disease in the UK, if not worldwide. In addition to the potential for tick mapping and greater understanding about what is perceived to be a rise in the risks to dogs and people from Lyme Disease, the emergence in four dogs in Essex of babesiosis, a life-threatening disease transmitted to dogs by infected ticks usually found in Europe, has highlighted the need for a major investigation on the scale of the Big Tick Project, says Professor Wall.

Professor Wall says: “The recent *Babesia* cases in Essex are of huge significance. The fact that we now appear to have established populations of the tick *Dermacentor reticulatus* acting as vectors of the introduced pathogen *Babesia canis* is a new and important development and a major concern for animal health. It clearly demonstrates the potential dangers from the inadvertent introduction of novel disease pathogens if vigilance and surveillance are not maintained.”

Dog owner Hollie Wilson's dream French holiday with husband Craig and two dogs Olive and Badger turned into a nightmare when Olive, a pointer, was bitten by a tick. Within days, Olive's condition had deteriorated and it was clear that she was becoming seriously unwell.

On arrival back in the UK, the Wilson's rushed their dog to their vet and after extensive tests, canine babesiosis, suspected by the vet on duty that day who had seen the disease in her native Poland, was confirmed.

Hollie says: "Her gums were completely white and she was anaemic. The race was on to find the recommended drug treatment and there was a lot of ringing round before she could finally be treated.



"I can honestly say without all the help from our vets, Olive would not be here today. It was due to their persistence in finding she had babesiosis and how Olive was treated so quickly, that she has made a full recovery.

"Looking back, losing Olive to babesiosis would have been heart-breaking.

"Back then, I probably wasn't aware so much of the risks of tick-borne disease before all this happened and was probably a bit naive as to where these risks were found. However I am most definitely aware of the dangers carried by ticks now!

"I think my message is to talk to your vet and find a tick treatment that is effective for your dog and ensure you use it on a regular basis as you never know which tick is infected. Although Lyme disease is well documented I am all too well aware now of the risk of other diseases that can be life threatening such as babesiosis. Seeing the disease being carried in ticks in the UK is extremely worryingly as a dog owner and more needs to be done through campaigns such as The Big Tick Project to raise awareness."

More information can be found at [www.msd-animal-health.co.uk](http://www.msd-animal-health.co.uk).

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