

Zoonotic Diseases: The Shared Threat

How to protect your family and your pet...

What are zoonotic diseases?

Owning a pet can be a rewarding experience for you and your family. However, pets can spread diseases that may be harmful to humans – especially those with weaker body defenses resulting from organ transplant. These diseases are called zoonotic diseases or zoonoses (pronounced zoo-NO-sees).

There are two types of zoonotic diseases that concern pet owners: illness that can be transmitted from animals to humans – like leptospirosis, and diseases that infect both people and pets – like Lyme disease. That's why it's important to protect both your family and your pet from zoonotic diseases. You share many things with your pet, but disease should not be one of them.



Zoonotic diseases that affect people

Cat scratch disease: Also known as “cat scratch fever,” this flea-borne infection is typically spread from a cat’s scratch or bite. Signs include pimples at the scratch site and swollen lymph nodes that may persist for six weeks or longer.

Ehrlichiosis: Transmitted by ticks, this bacterial disease can cause fever, muscle aches, vomiting and other more serious symptoms. As many as half of all patients with Ehrlichiosis require hospitalization.

Giardia: People become infected when they drink water containing the parasite *Giardia lamblia*. You can also become infected by putting something in your mouth that has come into contact with your pet’s stool. Signs include diarrhea, stomach cramps and nausea.

Leptospirosis: “Lepto” is a bacterial disease spread by contact with urine from an infected animal, including dogs, raccoons, squirrels and skunks. Lepto can cause high fever, severe headache, vomiting and, if left untreated, kidney damage or liver failure.

Lyme Disease: Spread by ticks, Lyme disease can cause arthritis and kidney damage. The number of Lyme disease cases has nearly tripled since 1990 and the disease is now found in every state.

Rabies: A virus found in the saliva of infected animals and transmitted to people by bites. It is invariably fatal if not promptly treated.

Ringworm: Ringworm is a fungal infection – not a worm – transmitted by contact with the skin or fur of an infected dog or cat. Signs include a bald patch of scaly skin on the scalp, or a ring-shaped, itchy rash on the skin.

Rocky Mountain spotted fever: A very serious, tick-borne disease that causes fever, headache and muscle pain, followed by a rash. May be fatal if left untreated.

Toxoplasmosis: This is a parasitic disease spread by contact with cat feces in soil or litter, although the major route of transmission is contaminated meat. It can cause serious health problems for transplant recipients.

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Simple ways to protect yourself

- Wash your hands often when touching, playing with or caring for pets
- Never handle the stool of any animal
- Avoid kissing your pet or letting your pet lick your face
- Do daily “tick checks” on yourself, your kids and your pet. If you find a tick, use tweezers to slowly pull it out. After removing the tick, immerse it in rubbing alcohol. Wash the tick bite wound and your hands with soap and water.
- Have someone else in the family clean the cat’s litter box. Locate the litter box away from active family areas and bedrooms.
- Gardening or working in soil where pets may have relieved themselves is not recommended for transplant recipients. Others should wash their hands immediately afterward.
- If you are scratched or bitten, wash the area with soap and water right away and administer first aid. Contact a healthcare professional especially if bitten.
- See your veterinarian and make sure your pet is protected against zoonoses and other disease threats in your area.



Remember to take these additional steps to protect your pet:

- Ask your veterinarian about tick and flea control
- Brush and inspect your pet for ticks after each outing
- Don’t let your pet drink from standing water outdoors
- Don’t let your pet come into contact with feces or urine of other animals
- Remove food, garbage or nesting materials that may attract disease-carrying wildlife

Consult your transplant coordinator about ownership of pets, health risks and related zoonotic diseases.

Proven ways to protect your pet

Many zoonotic diseases can be prevented by vaccination. Vaccines are now available for leptospirosis, Lyme disease, rabies and giardia. Keep pets current with their vaccination schedule. In addition, twice-a-year wellness exams performed by your veterinarian can help detect and treat zoonotic infections before they become serious, or are transmitted to other pets and people.

