

How to Remove a Tick

BACKGROUND

Ticks carry a variety of diseases that affect pets as well as people (but are not contagious directly between pet and person). If the tick population is high in your area, it is important to treat your pet every month with a tick-preventive product, along with tick removal as needed. Tick removal is easy and can be done at home, but it must be done properly to remove the entire tick and not leave the head or mouthparts of the tick lodged in the skin.

A tick's head is dark brown or black (like the rest of the body of most ticks) and is very small—about the size of the head of a pin. The tick's body can be a few times larger to hundreds of times larger, depending on how engorged the tick is with blood. What you see at first glance is the tick's body; closer inspection is needed to see the small head of the tick, which is your target for removal.

GETTING STARTED

Equipment/materials needed:

- Forceps or tweezers
- Isopropyl alcohol (rubbing alcohol)
- ± Antibacterial soap or diluted antiseptic such as povidone iodine/Betadine, or chlorhexidine
- ± Gauze

TROUBLESHOOTING BEFOREHAND

During removal or at any time, be sure to avoid squeezing the tick, which can inject the tick's intestinal content back into the pet. Avoiding squeezing the tick means a lower possibility of disease transmission.

Be sure to remove the tick's head, which is embedded in skin, and not just the body. When the tick is deeply embedded, the head and body could readily come apart if you are pulling on the tick's

body, leaving the head still in the skin. Therefore, extra care is needed to grasp the head of the tick directly at the surface of your pet's skin in order to seize the tick's head and remove the tick whole.

PROCEDURE

- Using forceps or tweezers, grasp the head of the tick flush with the skin, or even reach slightly into the skin with the tips, before closing the jaws of the forceps or tweezers. Then, gently pull straight out (do not twist).
- Specific tick-extraction devices that have a notch into which the tick's mouthparts slide for easy removal can be purchased at outdoor stores.
- No aftercare is usually needed, but you can clean the area with gauze and antibacterial soap or diluted skin disinfectant.
- Place the tick in rubbing alcohol; once it is dead (several minutes or more), place in the trash. An important exception is if your pet has recurrent infections with tickborne organisms. In that case, you should keep the tick in a sealed container, like an empty, clean margarine tub or Tupperware, and your veterinarian may wish to have the tick itself examined for parasites inside the tick. This can be an important diagnostic aid, and so can having the tick classified according to species for a better assessment of the disease organisms it might carry.

AFTERWARDS

Occasionally after tick removal, the skin may swell slightly, giving the appearance that a tick is still present. This tissue reaction to the tick's saliva can be present for several weeks. Allow the swelling to decrease without picking at it. If it persists longer than 2-3 weeks, you should have it evaluated by your veterinarian.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Should I wear gloves to remove a tick?

Wearing gloves is always a good idea, especially if the tick ruptures and blood from the tick coats your fingertips. But with careful handling and handwashing after tick removal, gloves should not be required.

Which diseases can a tick transmit to my pet and me?

People and pets can catch a variety of diseases from ticks, including (but not limited to) borreliosis/Lyme disease, Rocky Mountain spotted fever, and ehrlichiosis.

I have ticks all year round at my home. Should I treat my dog with a tick preventive product monthly all year?

Yes. Ticks can be difficult to eradicate, so tick prevention should be year-round. With heavy infestations, products that target both

eggs and adult ticks can be warranted, and your pets, pet beds, and your yard may require application of the anti-tick product by an exterminator or by you yourself. Such a thorough approach is useful when the tick burden is high, when there has been recurrent tickborne disease already, or when family-related factors increase the concern regarding tickborne diseases (for example, a member of the family is immunocompromised).

Removal of standing wood piles or trash, if any are present, is also valuable; these are common sites that harbor ticks in the environment. Storage rooms must also be treated, as they are often forgotten as a location that often harbors ticks.

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