

The Dirty Details of Dog Parks: Parasites, Pathogens, and Prevention



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Dog parks are a cost-effective, convenient, popular way to provide socialization and exercise for healthy dogs as well as provide people a chance to meet other dog owners in their communities. Unfortunately, the easily accessible nature of these parks means that your dog may be exposed to other dogs with health or behavior problems, leading to transmission of parasites and infectious diseases, as well as wounds resulting from inter-dog aggression. Regular exams and preventative care from your veterinarian can help keep your dog safe when you are at the dog park, so keep these things in mind before your dog's next playdate. **Remember, your dog is only as healthy as the sickest dog at the dog park!**

1. Intestinal parasites (worms and protozoa)

This is the single biggest risk to human health that can stem from dog park visits. Unregistered dogs, dogs of questionable health status, and wildlife may gain access to dog park facilities and defecate on the grounds, leading to conditions where parasite eggs can develop and infect other dogs (and even children who might be playing at the park). Studies estimate that approximately 20-40% of pet dogs visiting dog parks are carriers of intestinal parasites, many of which are zoonotic and can be transmitted to humans at home.¹⁻⁴

To help keep pet dogs healthy and prevent them from spreading parasites to playmates and their human families, dogs should receive an oral heartworm preventative year round, such as Heartgard Plus (Boehringer Ingelheim), Iverhart Plus (Virbac), or Simparica Trio (Zoetis). Oral heartworm preventatives usually treat and control common intestinal parasites, such as roundworms and hookworms, in addition to preventing infection with potentially fatal canine heartworm. Additionally, the manufacturers of these preventatives will frequently provide financial and technical assistance to owners whose pets may become infected with resistant parasites despite proper preventative use.



Your veterinarian should also recommend an annual stool sample check to test for intestinal parasites. The most sensitive fecal tests can detect parasite antigens and DNA, so even low-level infections can be diagnosed and treated. Annual fecal testing will make sure that regular preventatives are working as intended and help prevent your dog from being one of the ones to bring parasites to the park. It is also vitally important to clean up after your dog defecates at the park to reduce spread of parasites and other infections from contaminated feces, and to use hand sanitizer or wash your hands after doing so.

2. External parasites (fleas, ticks, and others)

External parasites can jump from dog to dog or can be transmitted from body-to-body contact. Flea and tick repellants and preventatives can greatly reduce the risk of your dog contracting an external parasite from another dog during park playtimes. Seresto collars (Bayer), topicals such as Frontline Gold (Boehringer Ingelheim), and oral preventatives such as Simparica (Zoetis) are all safe and effective at preventing fleas and ticks, with product-dependent effectiveness against mange mites, lice, and other external parasites. Preventing these parasites can also help keep your dog from developing other secondary illnesses, such as tapeworm infections, Lyme disease, and other tick-borne diseases.⁵

3. Infectious respiratory diseases and other communicable diseases

Direct contact with other dogs and their body fluids can provide a perfect opportunity for transmission of respiratory and other communicable diseases, especially kennel cough, influenza, conjunctivitis, infectious diarrhea, and even rabies.⁶ Even if your dog is fully vetted and vaccinated, no vaccine is perfect, and infectious diseases can still be transmitted when unfamiliar dogs are in close contact. While many small dog parks have vaccination and registration rules for attendees, these rules may be difficult to enforce (or may not exist) at larger community dog parks. Your dog should be up to date with rabies, distemper (DHPP, DALPP, DHLPP), and kennel cough (Bordetella) vaccines, as well as any other vaccines your park or play group might require (such as canine influenza). If your dog is sick, please avoid the dog park until clinical signs have resolved or until your veterinarian has cleared your pet for group play.

4. Fight wounds and physical incidents

While no veterinarian can prevent fight wounds ahead of time, owners can make sure that their pets are licensed, surgically spayed or neutered, vaccinated for rabies, and properly restrained while at the dog park to minimize the risk of a serious injury or post-bite rabies infection. Unintended matings and non-bite-related injuries (cruciate ligament tears, broken bones, sprains, broken toenails, etc.) can also occur. Any pet who is injured at a dog park should be evaluated by a veterinarian immediately to determine if post-exposure rabies boosters, antibiotics/pain meds, or intensive wound management are needed. Make sure you have contact information for your regular veterinarian or an emergency facility nearby before you set out for the dog park, to avoid having to scramble to find this information during an emergency.

Following all of these guidelines can help ensure that your dog is as safe and healthy as possible while participating in dog park playtime. If you are trying to choose a new dog park for your pup, look for the following criteria to help protect your dog's safety:

- Controlled access to the park area, such as a passcode, keyfob, or keyed lock - this limits entry of unregistered and unvaccinated dogs as well as limits exposure to wildlife
- Perimeter fencing to exclude wildlife and other animals and to keep dogs and errant toys out of traffic
- Firm requirements for all participating dogs to be vaccinated and licensed with the city or town, as well as registered with the dog park organization itself
- Readily accessible waste bags to encourage all park users to clean up after their dogs



- Water stations (with mosquito prevention) for warm days, or consider bringing a water dish to minimize contamination

In summary, the guidelines provided here can help keep your dog safe and healthy while he or she is enjoying puppy playtime at the dog park, as well as help prevent your dog from bringing zoonotic parasites and other diseases back to your home and family. If you have specific questions about how to best protect your dog from the diseases and parasites mentioned above, please ask your veterinarian.

REFERENCES

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