

Worms: hydatid disease

Description

Hydatid disease is caused by a tapeworm called *Echinococcus granulosus*. In Australia, most infections are passed to humans from infected dogs and sheep, although other animals, such as goats, dingoes, horses, kangaroos and foxes, can also spread the infection.

In humans, tapeworm cysts grow in various parts of the body, and any organ can be affected. Sometimes these cysts cause no symptoms at all and are found during routine chest X-rays. However, if the cysts grow in vital organs (such as the liver, lungs or brain), they may cause disease. Hydatid disease is more common in rural communities.

How does it spread?

The disease spreads when tapeworm eggs in animal faeces enter the body by the mouth. This may happen when a person handles dogs or objects soiled with dog faeces, then touches their mouth, or if they swallow contaminated food or water. Hydatid disease does not spread directly from person to person.

Incubation period

The incubation period can vary from months to years, depending on the number and location of cysts and how rapidly they grow.

Infectious period

Dogs begin to pass eggs of the tapeworm in their faeces around 7 weeks after becoming infected. Most infections in dogs resolve within 6 months, but some adult tapeworms may survive as long as 2–3 years. Dogs can become infected repeatedly.

Hydatid disease is not transmitted directly from person to person.

Exclusion period

Exclusion is not necessary.

Responsibilities of educators and other staff

- Ensure routine de-worming of dogs that frequent the education and care service.
- Make sure staff and children always practise effective hand hygiene, including after touching animals and before preparing or eating food.
- Ensure that appropriate cleaning practices are being followed in the education and care service.

Responsibilities of parents

- Encourage effective hand hygiene at home, including after touching animals and before preparing or eating food.
- Ensure routine de-worming of pet dogs, and do not let dogs lick people on the face. Dispose of dog faeces regularly, wearing gloves. Do not feed dogs raw offal.

Controlling the spread of infection

- Make sure staff and children always practise effective hand hygiene, including after touching animals and before preparing or eating food.
- Ensure routine de-worming of pet dogs, and do not let dogs lick people on the face. Dispose of dog faeces regularly, wearing gloves. Do not feed dogs raw offal.

Treatment

Treatment may include surgery to remove the cysts, often in combination with antiparasitic drug therapy.