Pets and Young Children

There are many existing myths about owning pets with young children in the home. Our concern should lie with those that are scientifically supported. These zoonotic diseases, diseases that are transmissible from animals to humans, include Toxoplasmosis, digestive parasites, Rabies, and Salmonellosis. We should also consider how to ease the transition for our four legged “fur-kids” as they adjust to the new family member and our changing routine.

Toxoplasmosis is a coccidian parasite shed in the stools of infected cats. Only the sporulated form, which develops 24 hours after a cat defecates, is contagious to humans. It is transmitted through ingestion of the parasite. To prevent human infection, we recommend scooping the litter pan daily, wearing gloves, and washing your hands thoroughly afterwards. Humans are far more likely to become infected with this parasite as a result of gardening or eating incompletely cooked meat than from their pet. Cover outdoor sand pits so that neighborhood cats won’t use it as a litter pan and potentially expose your child. Cats can be evaluated for the disease through a blood test, available at the International Center for Veterinary Services.

Have your veterinarian deworm your cat or dog and analyze a stool sample in the few months

prior to baby's arrival. This will help treat and diagnose fecal parasites, such as hookworms and roundworms, which can be transmitted to young children. Your veterinarian may recommend a monthly preventative and a regular deworming schedule to keep your pet and child protected.

Rabies is a uniformly fatal viral disease that may be transmitted from infected animals such as dogs and cats, to humans through saliva and bodily fluids (e.g., via bite wounds, licks on broken skin or mucous membranes such as mouth, nostrils, eyes, etc.) To ensure the safety of all family members, schedule an annual rabies vaccination for your pets. Protect your pets by housing them indoors and keeping them away from unvaccinated animals and wildlife.

Reptiles such as turtles and lizards, may carry a bacteria called Salmonella that can cause fever and diarrhea in humans, especially the young. These are not ideal pets in homes with infants or young children unless strict hygiene is carefully practiced.

In the months prior to baby's arrival, try to set up a routine with your pet that you can maintain after delivery. If there will be any additional caretakers in your home, be sure to introduce them to your pets. It is especially important to ensure your pet is eating during this time of change. Consider adding an extra food and water dish in a quieter area of the home. Cats in particular are prone to stress associated liver disease that may result from not eating properly or sufficiently.

Family dogs should be introduced to young infants with caution. Consider how your pet has interacted with children in the past and plan accordingly. Keep a close eye on your dog's body language with any introduction, and use your most cautious judgment on how to proceed. We recommend supervising dogs at all times when in the presence of infants and young children.

Additional resources:

www.avma.org/animal_health/pets_ZD_faq.asp

www.cdc.gov/HEALTHYPETS/

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