

Baylisascaris procyonis (Raccoon round worm)

Disease Fact Sheet Series

What is *Baylisascaris procyonis*?

This is a large roundworm parasite that lives in the intestines of raccoons. The worm does not harm the raccoon, but on rare occasions can cause serious illness in humans. About half of all raccoons tested in Wisconsin have been found to be infected. Raccoons throughout Wisconsin have shown to be infected with *Baylisascaris procyonis*, but it is more prevalent in the southern portion of the state.

How is this raccoon roundworm spread?

The adult worms shed microscopic eggs that pass to the raccoon's feces. Millions of eggs may be passed each day, which can then survive for months to years in the environment. The parasite is transmitted when the eggs are ingested by another animal. Humans generally become infected by accidentally ingesting eggs from soil, water, hands, or other raccoon feces contaminated objects.

What are the signs and symptoms of *Baylisascaris procyonis* in humans?

The severity of the disease depends to a large extent on how many eggs are ingested. These eggs hatch into larvae which then cause disease by migrating through the central nervous system, eyes, and other organs. Symptoms include nausea, lethargy, liver enlargement, incoordination, loss of muscle control, coma, and blindness. Fatalities are extremely rare, but have been reported. There have been no human cases ever reported in Wisconsin.

How soon after infection do symptoms appear?

In general, symptoms appear one to three weeks post-infection, although they may take as long as two months. This interval depends on the number of eggs ingested.

Who is at greatest risk for *Baylisascaris procyonis* infection?

Because of young children's tendency to put their fingers or objects into their mouths, such children are at risk if they play in areas that are frequented by raccoons. Hunters, trappers, taxidermists, and wildlife rehabilitators are also at increased risk if they handle raccoons or items contaminated with raccoon feces. In general, the risk of acquiring the infection is very low, and requires a fairly substantial exposure to raccoon feces.

How are *Baylisascaris procyonis* infections treated in humans?

There are no consistently effective treatment regimens available at this time.

How can I avoid exposure to this parasite?

Do **not** keep raccoons as pets; this is not only dangerous, it is also illegal. Baby raccoons are often infected. Discourage raccoons from visiting your home or yard by eliminating access to food sources like garbage cans and bird feeders. Raccoons may nest in, and defecate on, places like woodpiles, attics, chimneys, sheds, and barn lofts. Entrances to these areas can be sealed when the raccoons are away. Accumulated feces and contaminated wood, soil, hay or straw should be removed and burned or deeply buried in a site remote from houses. It is important to wear disposable gloves, boots, and a dust mask (such as a painter's mask) when disposing of such material. Contaminated surfaces can be decontaminated by flaming with a propane torch (used for concrete and other non-flammable surfaces) or with boiling Lysol.