



media *release*

Monday 10 February, 2014

SEASONAL CANINE ILLNESS PILOT STUDY SHOWS A NATIONAL STUDY COULD REVEAL MORE ABOUT POSSIBLE ASSOCIATION WITH HARVEST MITES, SAY VETS

Veterinary charity, the Animal Health Trust (AHT) has concluded a small pilot study, funded by the Kennel Club Charitable Trust, linked to its investigation of a possible association between seasonal canine illness (SCI) and harvest mites.

SCI is a mystery illness which can make dogs walked in woodlands suddenly become ill. In 2013 there were 143 cases reported to the AHT from across its five study sites in Nottinghamshire and East Anglia.

Cases of SCI are usually seen from August to November, with dogs showing clinical signs of vomiting, diarrhoea and/or lethargy within 24 to 72 hours of walking in woodland. Dog owners are advised to seek immediate veterinary advice should they see these signs in their dog following a woodland walk.

Despite no definitive cause being identified, the AHT recognised a common finding which may be linked to the development of SCI. A number of cases had an obvious infestation of harvest mites, which may also be present, but not as obvious, in other animals.

There are currently no products specifically licensed to prevent infestation by harvest mites. However sprays containing fipronil that are licensed against fleas and ticks on cats and dogs are believed to be effective against several different mites.

To investigate the possible link between SCI and harvest mites, during the 2013 SCI season the AHT advised dog owners to treat their dogs with fipronil spray before

walking in woodlands during high risk autumn months. Owners were advised to speak to their own veterinary surgeons before treating their dog using a spray containing fipronil as these products are only available on prescription from veterinary surgeons.

In addition to issuing this advice, the AHT, working with the Sandringham Estate in Norfolk and a manufacturer of one type of fipronil spray, conducted a pilot study. The study aimed to evaluate whether dog owners would comfortably access complementary fipronil spray from their vets and treat their animals prior to walking in woods on the estate.

As fipronil spray is a prescription only medicine, the AHT issued vouchers to dog owners which they could redeem for fipronil spray through their local vet practice. The aim of this pilot was to check whether this was a feasible method of providing the spray to dog owners, with the hope it could then be rolled out to other areas in the future and a meaningful assessment made of its effectiveness in preventing harvest mite infestation and SCI.

Twenty-four dog owners signed up to take part in the study, and those eligible were provided with fipronil spray. Conclusions from the pilot study reveal that all participating owners found it easy to enrol and take part in the study. The owners also thought the simple process of being able to claim the spray from their veterinary practice the best method of receiving the product.

Dr Richard Newton, Head of Epidemiology and Disease Surveillance at the AHT, said: "Through evaluating our pilot study we are confident that a larger, perhaps nationwide, study would be useful in further testing the possible association between harvest mites and SCI.

However, due to the size of the pilot study, we are not able to make valid conclusions as to whether fipronil spray protects against harvest mites. This in turn obviously means we cannot confirm or deny whether harvest mites have a direct correlation to SCI.

Through the pilot study we have devised an effective way of providing dog owners with fipronil spray at an appropriate time and we would love the opportunity to be able to develop this study to be able to confirm or deny whether harvest mites are a contributing factor to SCI, should sufficient funding be available.”

Due to the success of the pilot study in indicating that it is feasible to provide dog owners access to complementary fipronil, the AHT is currently exploring funding opportunities to progress the study in 2014.

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Additional notes:

- The Animal Health Trust (AHT) is an independent charity, employing over 200 scientists, vets and support workers. It aims to improve the health and welfare of horses, dogs and cats through research. It also provides specialist referral services and continuous education to vets. Visit the website at www.aht.org.uk
- In September 2010, the AHT was asked by the Sandringham Estate to investigate the illness on its site. Since the investigation began, more cases have been identified across Norfolk, Nottinghamshire and Suffolk and the AHT has been working with the Natural History Museum, the Institute of Zoology, the University of Liverpool, the AHVLA, the National Trust, Nottinghamshire County Council and the Forestry Commission on the investigation. The Camping and Caravanning Club, The Caravan Club and the Environment Agency have also assisted the investigation
- The AHT is grateful to the Kennel Club Charitable Trust for helping with funding towards the investigation. The funding, which started in January 2012, enabled the AHT to appoint a dedicated SCI coordinator
- The AHT advises any dog owner who is concerned about their dog's health, or if their dog is experiencing vomiting, diarrhoea and lethargy to contact their vet immediately.