



Dr Rob Webster is one of the founders of Animal Emergency Service (AES) and a Specialist in Veterinary Emergency and Critical Care Medicine. As a Director of AES, Dr Rob has spent many years helping South East Queensland pets and has treated more tick paralysis cases than you could begin to imagine. Given his experience in “Paralysis Tick Territory” we’ve asked Dr Rob some common questions in an effort to give you the facts.

What is a Paralysis Tick and why are they so dangerous in South East Queensland versus other Australian locations?

The paralysis tick is dangerous throughout its range, which is basically everywhere in Australia east of the Great Dividing Range. SEQ has favourable climate conditions for paralysis ticks so there are high numbers around. There is increased risk of pets coming in contact with a paralysis tick compared to other drier and cooler areas where there are less ticks around. All paralysis ticks should be considered potentially fatal.



How do I know the difference between a Paralysis Tick and other ticks?

It can be very difficult. I failed this question in vet school!

Paralysis ticks vary a lot in shape and colour depending on their environment, and the stage of feeding. The ticks increase in size considerably as they feed for about 5 days after attachment. In the above photos is an adult un-engorged female, and an engorged female. You will notice in the photos below that the legs are bunched up around the head of the tick rather than distributed evenly.

I recommend that you use tick prevention on your pets. If you find a tick attached to your pet, call your vet for advice. It is easy to incorrectly identify a paralysis tick and not worth the risk to your pet.



What are the signs my pet might have a Paralysis Tick?

The early signs of tick paralysis can be variable. All dogs and cats become paralysed, but this develops over a number of days. Before paralysis occurs common signs are a change in bark sound, gagging, retching, or vomiting. Some pets show breathing difficulty before anything else. Initially they may be reluctant or unable to walk up stairs, and later, wobbliness when walking and inability to get up. If you notice any of these signs you should get to a veterinarian immediately. There are other causes for all of these problems, but tick paralysis is a common culprit in South-East QLD.

What's the best way to remove one if I find it? Do I spray with metho; Coat with liquid soap; or just yank it out?

Grasp the tick firmly and pull it free. You can give a slight twist as well, but it's not essential. Place the tick in a sealed bag or bottle and bring it to a vet for identification.

If you find a paralysis tick on yourself, seek medical advice. Humans can develop severe allergic reactions (anaphylaxis) when a tick is removed.

If I don't want to touch the Paralysis Tick, is there another way for me to remove it?

You can use tweezers, or a 'tick removal tool', but I think you should probably see the vet. There are several products that may kill the embedded tick, but it is far faster and safer for your pet, if you remove the tick immediately.

What if I remove the tick and 'the head' is still lodged?

This situation is very uncommon. The mouth-parts of the tick almost always come out when you pull it. If not they will fall out later. Ticks leave a 'crater', which is a nasty sore caused by the body's reaction to the tick. This resolves over a few days, but is sometimes thought to be caused by the mouth-parts being left behind. Occasionally the sore will persist at the site of tick attachment. In this case you should see your vet.

Do I still need to see a vet if I've removed the tick?

Tick paralysis can develop even a few days after the tick has been removed, and a number of pets will have more than one tick attached. It's important to treat tick paralysis with anti-serum at the earliest time after early signs develop. For all these reasons you should take your pet to the vet for a check-up if you find a tick attached to them. The illness is too severe to take chances with.

My friend's pet had a paralysis tick and they didn't show any symptoms. Another friend had their pet put on a ventilator which cost thousands of dollars. What causes the difference?

The amount of toxin injected by the ticks can be very different, and there are some differences in toxicity in different regions. Another important aspect is the time between on-set of clinical signs, and

when anti-serum is administered. Even a pet with very early signs, may have a fatal dose of tick toxin in their body. If treatment is delayed the paralysis often gets worse, and the time to recovery becomes longer.

Respiratory failure occurs when the breathing muscles are paralysed, or if a pet develops pneumonia (a common complication of tick paralysis). Some of these patients require life support until their condition improves. Life support takes over the task of breathing, and requires heavy sedation or anaesthetic. Some patients come in to the vet clinic with respiratory failure, but it can also occur after treatment for tick paralysis. About one patient in ten (10%) with tick paralysis will develop respiratory failure.

Tick prevention, and early treatment are the ways to minimise the impact of paralysis ticks.

What can I do to ensure my pet doesn't get a Paralysis Tick and is this 100% effective?

There are a number of registered products available. My recommendation is to talk to your local veterinarian about what works best in your area and for your individual pet. For dogs I recommend the products called 'Isoxazolines' as they are extremely effective at killing paralysis ticks. I use Bravecto on my dogs, and recommend it for my patients.

Nothing is 100% effective. As well as tick prevention medication you should search your pets daily for paralysis ticks and remove any you find.

Tick preventative medication does not treat tick paralysis. If your dog shows any of the signs of tick paralysis you should seek veterinary assistance immediately.

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