

PARALYSIS TICK INFORMATION FACT SHEET



The paralysis tick (*Ixodes holocyclus*) is one of the most dangerous parasites for Australian pets.

Found mainly along the east coast from North Queensland to Victoria, they thrive in bushland, scrub, and coastal areas. These ticks attach to the skin and feed on blood, injecting a powerful neurotoxin as they feed.

Without quick treatment, this toxin can lead to paralysis and even, death.

Why are paralysis ticks a problem?

Paralysis ticks are far more dangerous than nuisance ticks that cause only skin irritation. When they feed, they release a powerful neurotoxin that interferes with the way nerves and muscles communicate.

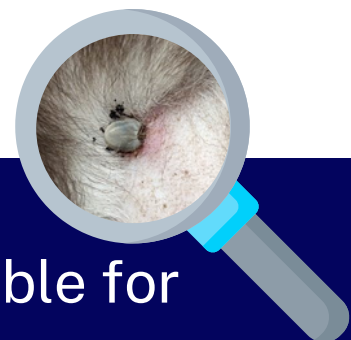


This toxin gradually paralyzes muscles in the body, starting with weakness in the back legs and eventually affecting the chest and throat. If untreated, pets can no longer breathe on their own.

The risk is particularly high along Australia's east coast, where the paralysis tick is common. Cases peak in spring and summer when ticks are most active, but they can be found year-round in some regions. Pets do not need to go bushwalking to be exposed — ticks are often carried into suburban backyards by wildlife such as bandicoots, possums, and birds.

Even a single tick can cause life-threatening illness. Because the signs can be subtle at first, many owners don't realise their pet is affected until the condition has progressed.

Quick recognition and treatment are essential to save lives.



**DID YOU
KNOW?**

Paralysis ticks are responsible for more pet deaths in Australia than snake bites.

How do pets pick up paralysis ticks?

Paralysis ticks live in humid, sheltered environments such as long grass, leaf litter, low shrubs, and bushland. They don't jump or fly. Instead, they climb to the tips of grass and foliage and wait with outstretched legs for a host to brush past. This behaviour is called "questing."

When a pet moves through these areas, ticks grab hold of the coat and quickly crawl across the body in search of a suitable feeding site. They prefer areas with thin skin and good blood supply, such as:

- Around the head and muzzle
- Under the collar and jawline
- Inside ears and lips
- Between toes and in armpits
- Along the chest and belly

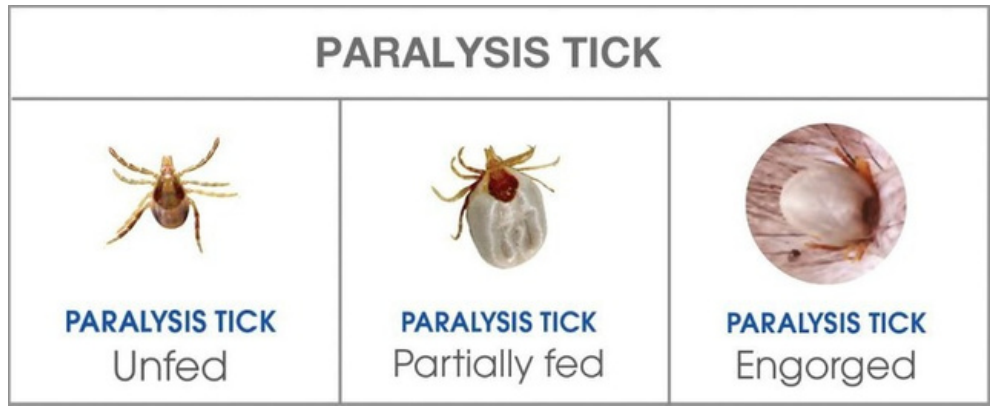
Once a tick attaches, it buries its mouthparts into the skin and feeds for up to six days.

During this time, the tick injects increasing amounts of toxin into the bloodstream. The longer the tick remains, the higher the toxin load — and the greater the danger to your pet.

Wildlife such as wallabies, wild rabbits, mice and possums are natural hosts for paralysis ticks.

Pets can be exposed even if they never leave the backyard, as ticks are carried in by native animals or even on clothing.

This makes prevention and daily tick checks essential for all pets living in or near tick-prone areas.



What signs should I look for?

Paralysis ticks release a toxin that blocks communication between nerves and muscles. This means the muscles gradually lose strength and control, starting with the back legs and eventually affecting breathing and swallowing.

Signs usually appear 3–5 days after attachment, and may worsen fairly quickly.

Look for:

- Unsteady back legs. Pets may wobble, stumble, or struggle to jump up.
- Voice changes. A dog's bark or a cat's meow may sound hoarse or unusual.
- Swallowing problems such as gagging, coughing, or vomiting that doesn't resolve.
- Breathing difficulty can be noisy, laboured, or rapid breathing as chest muscles weaken.
- Lethargy and weakness. Pets may lie down more, refuse walks, or collapse.

In advanced cases, pets can no longer breathe on their own. Even if you remove a tick, the toxin already in the system can continue to act for up to 48 hours. That's why urgent veterinary care is essential as soon as you notice any of these signs.



Ticks are tiny and live in humid, sheltered environments such as long grass, leaf litter, low shrubs, and bushland.



An image of a ringtail Possum - a common carrier of Paralysis Ticks!

How can I prevent paralysis ticks?

Prevention is the safest way to protect your pet. A single tick can cause life-threatening illness, so using reliable protection and daily checks together offers the best defence.

Over-the-counter preventatives:

Many flea, tick, and mite preventative treatments are available as spot-ons, tablets, sprays, and tick collars. These can reduce the risk of paralysis ticks, but always check the label carefully because some dog products are toxic to cats. For the best coverage, ask your vet or local pet retailer expert which product suits your pet's size, species, and lifestyle.

Daily tick checks:

Even with preventatives, no product is 100% effective. Run your hands over your pet's skin and coat at least once a day, especially after walks. Focus on hidden areas such as ears, lips, under the collar, armpits, chest, groin, and between toes.

Environmental care:

Keep lawns short, remove leaf litter,

and reduce dense vegetation around your home. Wildlife such as bandicoots and possums can carry ticks into suburban backyards, so limiting their access helps reduce risk.

Avoid tick habitats:

During high-risk seasons (spring and summer), avoid long grass, scrub, and bush areas where ticks are most common.

How is tick paralysis treated?

If you find a tick:

- Remove it immediately with a tick remover or tweezers, grasping close to the skin.
- Keep the tick for your vet to identify.
- Do not assume removal is enough. You still need to take your pet to the vet.

If your pet is severely, veterinary treatment may include:

- Antiserum to neutralise the toxin
- Oxygen support if breathing is affected
- IV fluids and medication to support recovery

- Careful monitoring, as symptoms can worsen before improvement begins

Early treatment is lifesaving.

Even if you are unsure, err on the side of caution and see your vet immediately.

Are there any other ticks my pet can get?

There are other ticks to be on the look out for. Two species of ticks in particular can also be a cause for concern.

Brown dog ticks which despite being non-venomous, are known to cause discomfort and irritation, and transmit blood-borne diseases, such as tick fever. They are commonly found in the environment of the animal they attach themselves to.

The bush tick, while preferring cattle, will also feed on other animals. It is also non-venomous, and can cause discomfort, irritation and transmit tick fever. They can be found in rural or semi-rural areas with a hot or humid climate.

If you are not sure about ticks in your area, speak to your vet or your pet retail expert.



Mortality without treatment is estimated at over 95%, but with rapid veterinary care survival is high.

