

HEARTWORM DISEASE

Heartworm disease can affect dogs **and cats** and is one of the major health problems of dogs in the United States. The disease develops after a pet becomes infected with parasites called *Dirofilaria immitis* that are transmitted through the bite of an infected mosquito. Dogs can have a few to hundreds of heartworms while cats usually have only a few worms. This infection can cause severe lung disease and damage, heart failure, and damage to other organs. Uncared for dogs, coyotes, wolves, and foxes can be carriers of heartworms. Heartworms are not contagious from dog to dog or dog to people. They are only transmitted by the bite of the infected mosquito and we have an abundance of infected mosquitoes in our area.

Dogs and cats may go for extended periods of time and not show any signs of heartworm disease. When dogs do show clinical signs, they can range from tiredness, reluctance to exercise, coughing, decreased appetite, and weight loss. When heart failure occurs, dogs usually have a swollen belly (fluid accumulation in the abdomen). These dogs can have sudden onset of labored breathing and collapse. Signs in cats include coughing, intermittent vomiting, asthma-like attacks, lack of appetite, and weight loss. Unfortunately, the first sign in some cats is sudden death.

A blood test done by your veterinarian can easily and quickly tell if your dog or cat has heartworms. Dogs over 7 months old should be tested before being started on heartworm prevention. (It can take up to seven months from the time a dog is bitten by infected mosquitoes until a blood test can accurately detect the presence of adult worms.) Giving heartworm prevention to an infected dog could lead to a severe reaction that could be harmful or fatal to your dog.

Prevention is the key and is much safer and less expensive than treatment for heartworms. The American Heartworm Society states that all dogs and cats in the U.S. need to be on heartworm prevention year round. Heartworm prevention is prescription medication that comes in the forms of monthly oral chewable tablets, topical monthly medication, and a six month injectable for dogs. Oral monthly and topical monthly medications are available for cats. Heartworm

medications can also deworm for various intestinal parasites. There is even an oral chewable monthly product that is heartworm prevention and kills adult fleas also.

Heartworm treatment for dogs includes medication to kill the larvae (baby heartworms) and injectable medication to kill the adult worms. The treatment is preceded by labwork and chest xrays and is done in stages over a few months. There is no approved treatment for heartworm disease in cats.

You may be surprised to find out that people can get heartworm disease from a mosquito bite. It is a good thing though that people are not a natural host for heartworms. There is no reliable diagnostic test for heartworm disease in humans. Most people that have been diagnosed with heartworms are smokers that had a lesion on their lung on xray and had surgery to remove the lesion. On microscopic exam of the lesion, it revealed heartworms, not cancer.

Let us all prevent this terrible disease by testing and keeping our dogs and cats on heartworm prevention. They depend on us.

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