



HEARTWORM DISEASE

Heartworm disease is a serious and sometimes fatal infection that affects over a million pets in the United States. Mosquitoes are responsible for transferring microscopic larvae from animal to animal and spreading this devastating infection. Once infected, the larvae migrate to the heart where they grow up to 6 to 12 inches in length and begin to reproduce. As these heartworms eventually die, they travel into the small vessels of the lungs where they cause damage that can sometimes be permanent. For dogs, this can lead to clinical signs such as coughing, exercise intolerance, weight loss and a decreased appetite. Without treatment, the disease can progress to congestive heart failure and even death. Cats can also be infected with heartworms but tend to show little to no clinical signs.

In dogs, heartworm treatment is possible although it is costly and post-treatment complications can be seen. During treatment, it is extremely important to keep dogs as quiet and exercise restricted as possible to minimize the risk of complications. This can prove to be a difficult task, especially with younger, more exuberant dogs. Dogs are given multiple intramuscular injections of a medication called Melarsomine, which will kill adult heartworms. They are also treated with adjunctive medications such as steroids to decrease inflammation, antibiotics to kill associated bacteria, heartworm preventatives to kill the larvae and sometimes furosemide if signs of heart failure have developed. In more severe cases, surgery may be performed to physically remove some of the adult heartworms from the heart and lung vessels. In most cases, treatment is successful, and dogs can go on to live normal, healthy lives.

Heartworm testing is recommended yearly by many veterinary hospitals to help catch this disease early so that treatment can be successful. Annual screening allows veterinarians to not only check for heartworms but also look for exposure to three of the most common tick diseases: Lyme, Ehrlichia and Anaplasma. It is very important to check any newly adopted dog for heartworm disease, especially before starting preventatives. There can be a 6-month lag period between exposure and testing positive for the disease, so repeating a heartworm test again in 6 months is recommended. Heartworm is found in all 50 states but is especially prevalent in the Southern United States as temperatures are warmer and support mosquitoes year-round. Puppies and dogs from these areas should be monitored closely.

The good news about heartworm disease is that it is very preventable! There are a variety of medications that should be given to dogs and cats monthly to help prevent infection with heartworm larvae. Many of these preventatives also help treat for other types of parasites as well. These medications are extremely safe and cost-effective. Mosquito repellants and avoiding high-risk areas are also important for preventing the disease. Talk to your veterinarian today about starting your pet on a heartworm prevention plan!