
Heartworm Disease

DESTROYING YOUR FAMILY FROM THE INSIDE

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As native Texans we are familiar with the unofficial state bird, the mosquito. Did you know that they are more than just a nuisance? Mosquitoes can transfer deadly parasites from one pet to another called heartworms. Despite their name, these parasitic worms primarily live in the pulmonary arteries (blood vessels of the lungs), but can travel to the heart in severe cases. Heartworm disease is spread when a mosquito bites an animal with heartworm disease and ingests microfilariae, the beginning stage of a heartworm. Once inside the mosquito, the microfilariae develops into the infective larval stage, and can then be spread to another susceptible host when bitten by the mosquito. Animals that are prone to heartworms disease include, but are not limited to: dogs, cats, ferrets and wild dogs. While cats are not a natural host, they can still contract the disease and the effects are almost always life threatening.

Common signs of heartworm disease include coughing, labored breathing and exercise intolerance. If the heartworm infection is severe, animals can potentially collapse, develop right-sided congestive heart failure (fluid build-up in the abdomen or around the lungs), or require physical removal of heartworms that have moved into the heart (caval syndrome). Heartworm disease must be treated in a timely manner to ensure your pet has the best chance for a healthy recovery.

Most cases show mild to moderate

symptoms, but some cases exhibit no symptoms at all. Therefore, an annual heartworm test is the best way to determine if your dog may have heartworms. It can take up to six months from the time an animal is bitten by a mosquito carrying infective heartworm larvae for the



heartworm to mature and be detectable by blood testing. It is important to have a new dog older than 6 months tested upon adoption; however, it must be remembered that the test can be negative at that time if the dog was bitten by an infected mosquito less than six months prior. Heartworm preventative can be started at that time, but a second test should be performed in six months to ensure that the dog is heartworm free. Since cats are not the natural host, and detection can be difficult, testing is typically only performed when the disease is suspected based on symptoms.

The best method to keep your pet from contracting heartworms is to keep them

on heartworm preventative year round no matter what the climate—even indoor only pets! It only takes a single infective mosquito to sneak into your house and bite your pet to cause this life-threatening disease. There are multiple heartworm preventatives ranging from monthly oral medication to topical solutions. When administered properly, these preventatives are very effective at preventing heartworm disease. It is best to consult with your family veterinarian to ensure you are giving the best product for your pet.

If your dog has heartworm disease, the best option for treatment is injections used to kill the adult heartworms. As long as adult heartworms are present, they will continue to cause potentially non-reversible damage to the pulmonary arteries and lungs. With this treatment your dog must remain quiet and calm while the medication takes effect in order to prevent serious complications. Unfortunately, this form of treatment is not an option for cats, therefore, prevention is very important.

The “slow kill” method of treating heartworm disease is no longer recommended unless the dog has health issues that would not allow them to receive the injections. This method allows the adult heartworms to remain present for a prolonged period (possibly years), therefore increases the likelihood of the dog developing permanent pulmonary artery and lung damage. Additionally, this form of treatment is potentially contributing to heartworm preventative resistance in pets.