

What you Need To Know About Heartworms

By Jessica Gray, DVM

What are Heartworms?

Heartworm disease is a serious and potentially fatal disease affecting pets in the United States. It is caused by foot-long worms that live in the heart and it can lead to heart failure. Heartworm disease affects dogs, cats and ferrets but can live in other mammals such as wolves, coyotes, foxes and sea lions making them carriers of the disease. It is transmitted by mosquitoes which unfortunately we have plenty of here in Texas and they can go anywhere they want! This means even if your cat or dog is inside the majority of the time they are still susceptible because mosquitos can still be indoors.

The dog is the natural host for heartworms. If left untreated, their numbers can increase and in some cases, reach several hundred. Heartworm disease causes lasting damage to the heart and lungs. Heartworms in the cat is different than the dog. The cat is an atypical host for heartworms so most worms do not survive to the adult stage. Cats typically only have one to three worms but it means the disease usually goes undiagnosed and there is unfortunately no treatment for heartworms in cats.

How are heartworms transmitted?

The mosquito plays a critical role in the transmission of heartworms. Adult female heartworms living in an infected dog, fox, coyote or wolf produce microscopic baby worms called microfilaria that circulate in the bloodstream. When a mosquito bites and takes a meal from an infected animal, it picks up these baby worms which develop and mature into the infective larval stage within the mosquito. Then, when the infected mosquito bites a dog, cat or susceptible wild animal the infected larvae enter via the mosquito's bite wound. Once inside the new host it takes approximately 6 months for the larvae to mature into an adult. Once mature, heartworms can live for 5-7 years in a dog or 2-3 years in a cat.

What are the signs of Heartworm disease?

In the early stages of the disease many dogs show few or no symptoms at all. The longer the infection persist, the more likely symptoms will develop. Symptoms may include a mild persistent cough, reluctance to exercise, fatigue, loss of appetite and weight loss.

Why should you worry about heartworms?

Every year we are having a greater incidence of heartworms disease and it is spreading to new regions of the country. People are traveling more and more with their animals, some to areas where heartworms are very common. Also stray and neglected dogs and certain wildlife such as coyotes, wolves and foxes can be carriers of heartworms and with the development of new communities we are living in closer proximity of wildlife. Lastly mosquitos can be blown great distances by the wind and the relocation of infected pets to previously uninfected areas contribute to the spread of heartworms. This happened following Hurricane Katrina.

The fact is heartworm disease has been diagnosed in all 50 states.

What are the current Recommendations?

The American Heartworm Society and North Texas Veterinary Clinic recommend you get your pet tested every 12 months for heartworms to ensure the prevention program is working, and to give your pet heartworm prevention all 12 months of the year, which can be started as early as 8 weeks of age. At North Texas Vet Clinic you can test your pet for heartworms at any time, just give us a call! The test only requires a single drop of blood. The Heartworm Society recommends that dogs who have not been current on heartworm prevention, or have had a lapse in prevention, be tested prior to starting on prevention and then be tested again in 6 months. It takes at least 6 months for the dog to test positive for heartworms after it has been infected. Monthly preventions work by eliminating the immature larval stages of the heartworm so they don't have a chance to develop into adults. The treatment is more costly than 10 years or more of prevention!

What IF...?

The preventions we use can eliminate the larvae but do not kill adults, so unfortunately, if your dog does test positive, a completely separate treatment is required to kill the adult heartworms. If your dog tests positive one of our veterinarians will help walk you through the treatment process and develop a plan for you and your pet following the guidelines set in place by the American Heartworm Society.