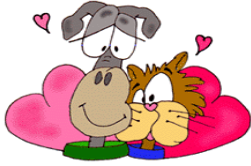


Canine and Feline Heartworm Disease



What is heartworm?

Heartworm is a large worm (from 5 to 14 inches long) that lives in the heart and blood vessels of the lungs of infected animals. Pets acquire heartworm by being bitten by a mosquito that has already bitten and drawn blood from an infected animal.

Do We Have it Here?

Heartworm disease is found in many areas of North America, including Ontario, and in Ottawa we are seeing rising numbers of cases each year. Southwestern Ontario has the highest number of cases each year.

What Happens if My Dog Gets Heartworm?

The larval heartworms that are transmitted via the mosquito bite mature in your pet's bloodstream into adult worms, which take up residence in the blood vessels of the lungs. If the infection is severe, with many worms, they will back up through the blood vessels into the heart itself. A dog that is infected with heartworm does not necessarily have many adult worms, or worms in the heart, and in these cases the dog may not have any symptoms of disease. However, once there is a significant infection the dog's blood vessels become damaged, leading to possible problems with blood clotting. Fluid may collect in the lung tissue, and the heart, if full of worms, cannot pump efficiently and begins to fail. These dogs will show exercise intolerance and coughing, and may have nose bleeds. As the heart muscle becomes more damaged, arrhythmias and sudden death may occur.

What About my Cat?

Cats can get heartworm, although they are not a natural host for the disease. Typically they have only a few worms, and the disease can be very difficult to diagnose. Cats tend to develop more of a respiratory disease, with coughing and often chronic vomiting. Sudden death may also occur, as in dogs.

How is it Diagnosed?

There are several methods used to diagnose heartworm infection and disease. Infection is typically diagnosed using one of several blood tests (although these tests are not very useful in cats). X-rays and ultrasound may be used to confirm infection and the degree of damage being caused by the worms. We recommend that dogs be tested each spring, approximately 5-6 months after the end of the previous mosquito season, which allows time for the infection to develop far enough along to be detected. This is important even if you gave ALL of your preventive medication diligently the year before, as not all of the preventives are 100% effective, and even dogs who enjoy getting the pills may vomit them or spit them out later. Early diagnosis gives your pet a much better chance of being treated successfully, should they have become infected while on preventive.

Can it be Treated or Prevented?

Luckily, the disease is preventable, and also treatable if necessary. Prevention is the preferred option, as treatment of a heartworm infection is costly and dangerous to the pet. There are several different formulations of preventive medication, ranging from chewable or flavoured tablets to topical drops applied to the skin. Your veterinarian can discuss which is most appropriate for your pet. It is recommended that all dogs and cats that go outdoors use a preventive medication from June 1 to November 1 each year. Pets travelling to the southern U.S. generally need to be on preventive year round.