

What You Need To Know About Heartworms

HEARTWORM



AWARENESS

Heartworm is a preventable, but serious and potentially fatal, parasite that primarily infects dogs, cats and ferrets. It can also infect a variety of wild animals. There have been documented human infections, but they are thought to be rare and do not usually result in signs of illness.

How is heartworm transmitted?

Heartworms can only be transmitted from animal to animal by mosquitoes. When a mosquito bites an infected animal, young heartworms called microfilariae enter into that mosquito's system.

The infective larvae mature into adult heartworms in approximately six months. The worms damage the blood vessels, and reduce the heart's pumping ability, resulting in severe lung and heart disease.

When the animal shows signs of illness due to adult heartworm infection, it is called heartworm disease.

Adult heartworms can survive for 5 to 7 years in dogs and several months to years in cats.

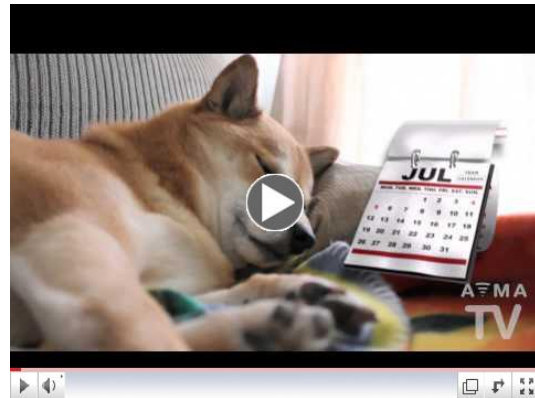
Where are heartworms found?

Geographically, heartworms are a potential threat in every state as well as in many other countries around the world. All dogs, regardless of age, sex, or living environment, are susceptible to heartworm infection. Indoor, as well as outdoor, cats are also at risk for the disease. If you plan to travel with your dog or cat to a different part of the country, or another country, ask your veterinarian about the risk of heartworm infection in the area where you are going to relocate or visit. ***We currently have two heartworm positive dogs in our practice, so yes we do have mosquitoes in Santa Cruz.***

What pets should be tested for heartworm?

Because heartworms are spread by mosquitoes, any pet exposed to mosquitoes should be tested. This includes pets that only go outside occasionally. Remember that mosquitoes can also get into homes, putting indoor-only pets at risk as well.

Blood tests are performed by your veterinarian to detect the presence of adult heartworm infection in



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your dog. Further tests, such as chest x-rays, a blood profile and an ultrasound of the heart, may be necessary to confirm the diagnosis, to evaluate the severity of the disease, and to determine the best treatment plan for your dog. The diagnosis of heartworm infection in cats is more difficult than it is with dogs. A series of different tests may be needed to help determine the likelihood of heartworm infection as the cause of your cat's illness.

The American Heartworm Society recommends testing pets every 12 months for heartworm and giving your pet a heartworm preventive 12 months a year.

How can I tell if my pet has heartworm infection or disease?

DOGS: If your dog has been recently or mildly infected with heartworms, he/she may show no signs of illness until the adult worms have developed in the lungs and signs of heartworm disease are observed. As the disease progresses, your dog may cough, become lethargic, lose his/her appetite or have difficulty breathing. You may notice that your dog seems to tire rapidly after only moderate exercise.

CATS: Signs of possible heartworm disease in cats include coughing, respiratory distress, and vomiting. In some cases, a cat may suddenly die from heartworms.

How can my pet be treated?

Heartworm is a progressive, life-threatening disease. The earlier it is detected and treated, the better the chances that your pet will recover and have less complications.

DOGS: As with most medical problems, it is much better to prevent heartworm infection than to treat it. However, if your dog does become infected with heartworms there is an FDA-approved treatment available. There is substantial risk involved in treating a dog for heartworms. However, serious complications are much less likely in dogs that are in good health and when you carefully follow your veterinarian's instructions.



CATS: There is currently no effective and safe medical treatment for heartworm infection or heartworm disease in cats. If your cat is diagnosed with heartworms, your veterinarian may recommend medications to reduce the inflammatory response and the resulting heartworm disease, or surgery to remove the heartworms.

Can heartworm disease be prevented?

Heartworm infection is almost 100% preventable in dogs and cats. There are several FDA-approved heartworm preventives available in a variety of formulations. Your veterinarian can recommend the best method of prevention based upon your pet's risk factors and lifestyle. Of course, you have to remember to give your pet the preventive in order for it to work!

For more information about heartworm,
visit the [American Heartworm Society's website](#) and [AVMA](#).



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