

Canine Heartworm Disease

Canine Heartworm disease is very prevalent in the Houston and Gulf Coast Area. Heartworms are transferred to dogs by mosquito bites. The mosquito actually injects heartworm larvae inside the dog's body when it takes a blood meal. The larvae, once inside the dog's body, migrate towards the right side of the dog's heart. This process can take up to 6 months. Once inside the right side of the dog's heart, the heartworms actually grow and start to reproduce. (Yes, there are actually male and female heartworms; the females are larger and can cause the most damage.) The new baby heartworms enter the blood stream of the dog and continue to mature. The next time a hungry mosquito bites that dog, it ingests blood with heartworm larva, and the life cycle starts over again. It takes one bite of an infected mosquito to cause heartworm disease in an unprotected dog.

The first signs of heartworm disease usually consist of coughing, lethargy, and possible weight loss. If heartworm disease is allowed to progress, the dog will eventually show signs of heart failure which can include abdominal swelling, severe coughing, marked weight loss, collapsing, and death.

The American Heartworm Society recommends yearly heartworm tests for all dogs in endemic areas. A dog may test positive for heartworm disease either by a microfilaria test (a visual test to look for the larva in the blood), or preferably by an occult heartworm test (an antigen test that actually tests for the presence of adult female heartworms in the heart.) The occult test is considered a more accurate test because there are some instances where dogs do not have larva in their bloodstream, but may have the adults in their heart.

If a dog tests positive for heartworm disease, there is a treatment. The treatment consists of injections of a chemical (similar to arsenic, but designed to be less toxic) given intramuscularly. Most veterinarians recommend a physical exam, blood work, x-rays, etc. to insure the dog is healthy enough to undergo heartworm treatment. It is preferable to treat heartworm positive dogs before they start showing signs of heartworm disease. Please consult your local veterinarian if you have any questions regarding heartworm treatment.

Fortunately, modern veterinary medicine has provided dog owners many ways to protect our pets from this deadly disease. The preventatives consist of once a month pills or topical treatments and are considered affordable. They are often combined with other anti-parasitic medications so they have additional benefits for our pets. (Intestinal parasite and flea preventatives, etc.) It is not recommended to give a heartworm positive dog heartworm preventative unless it under veterinary supervision. Giving heartworm preventative to heartworm positive dogs, in an extreme case, could cause the death of the dog.

Susan McCann, DVM
Summerwood Veterinary Clinic
13057 West Lake Houston Pkwy
Houston, TX 77044 (281) 225-4738