

Heartworm Disease

What is Heartworm? Heartworm is a disease transmitted by the bite of a mosquito. A mosquito bites an infected dog and then bites another dog, injecting larvae under the skin of the dog. The larvae grow for 3 - 4 months, move to the heart, develop into adults, mate, and begin the cycle again. Adult heartworms reach about 14 inches in length and look like long spaghetti noodles. Heartworms clog the heart and the major blood vessels leading to the heart and can cause malfunction of lungs, liver, kidneys, and other damage. The worms clog the heart and pulmonary artery until they either kill their host or until the worms are killed and eliminated (hopefully without killing the dog in the process).

Heartworms cause much internal damage before outward signs of the disease can be observed. That's why early detection and prevention are so important. Diagnosis is made by a simple blood test.

What does every dog owner need to know about heartworms?

1. Heartworm is a very serious disease; it is life-threatening in addition to being very painful for a dog.
2. Heartworm disease is easily prevented by simply giving your dog a chewable tablet once a month. Prevention costs less than \$100/year.
3. Treatment is expensive and involves giving a dog a very strong drug and keeping the dog quiet for several months. Treatment can be quite involved and cost between \$400 to over \$2,000 depending upon the disease's stage, where the treatment is given and whether other health conditions complicate the treatment approach. If the disease advances to a severe stage, surgical intervention may be needed to attempt to save the dog. That means literally pulling the heartworms out of a dog's heart and pulmonary artery. A short video of such a veterinary surgery --that removes 86 spaghetti-like adult heartworms from a dog named Davey --can be watched at:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOLzFsNOJ-4>

Prevention! Prevention! Prevention! Why does prevention matter? Heartworm can kill your dog! Prevention is relatively inexpensive while treatment is expensive, risky and not always successful.

What can you do?

- Every year, take your dog to the Vet for a routine heartworm test and to determine a prevention plan. The conventional approach consists of monthly chewable pills. A less conventional method is an anti-parasite herbal approach, but this should only be done with expert supervision and often with heartworm tests given every 6 months.

Heartworm Disease (cont.)

- Give your dog(s) his/her chewable heartworm preventative tablet every month and on the same day every month.

Some excellent resources for more information are:

http://www.marvistavet.com/html/body_the_pet_web_library.html

The American Heartworm Society also offers vast information about heartworm disease:

<http://www.heartwormsociety.org/>

For photos of heartworms in the heart and in the pulmonary artery, see:

<http://www.heartwormsociety.org/pet-owner-resources/heartworm.html#treatment>

About the parasite itself, refer to:

http://www.marvistavet.com/html/heartworm_-_the_parasite.html