

HEARTWORM DISEASE IN DOGS

By Dr Teresa Gregory

Canine heartworm disease is caused by a parasite that lives in the right side of the heart and the great vessels leading into the lungs of infected dogs. In the United States, this infection is the most prevalent in the southeast but has been recorded in all 50 states. Heartworm disease is very serious and often deadly. Early signs can include mild cough which progresses to severe coughing, shortness of breath, and weakness with exercise as the worms grow in the infected dogs heart and arteries. Heartworms are spread by mosquitoes. The mosquito bites an infected dog and picks up the immature form of the worm, called microfilaria. The microfilaria grow into the infective larval form in the mosquito. Once the heartworm reaches the larval form, it is passed on to the next dog when it is bitten by a mosquito.

All dogs over 6 months of age should be tested for heartworms. This is a simple test that your veterinarian can run quickly, it only requires a few drops of blood and usually takes about 10 minutes to run. If the test is negative the dog should be put on monthly preventative, which is a relatively inexpensive and effective way of preventing heartworms. There are several good brands of heartworm prevention, including flavored chews and topical drops that are absorbed through the skin. Most preventatives also help protect against many intestinal parasites.

If a dog tests positive for heartworms, it requires further workup to determine how much damage has already been done and to see if it is stable enough to attempt treatment. Your veterinarian will usually want chest radiographs and a blood panel including a CBC and chemistry to start, more testing may be required depending on the results of those tests. Treatment for heartworm consists of injections of a medication that kills the adult worms. The exact protocol depends on how severely affected the dog is. After treatment infected dogs must be kept very quiet for one to two months to reduce the risk of the dying worms blocking vessels to the lungs. It is also critical to monitor the dog for any sign of reactions including difficulty breathing or extreme weakness. Each case is different depending on the degree of damage to the heart and lungs, the number of worms involved, and the overall condition and any other illnesses the infected dog may have. Overall, annual heartworm testing followed by monthly heartworm prevention is a vital way to help protect your pet's health and safety.