

Heartworm Disease

Heartworm disease in dogs is a serious and potentially fatal disease that is 100% preventable. Heartworms spend their adult lives in the right side of the heart and the large blood vessels that connect the heart to the lungs. The adult worms block the heart and major blood vessels leading from the heart to the lungs, liver, and kidneys. This causes heart damage and eventually heart failure.

Heartworms that breed in a dog's heart can produce babies (microfilare). These are transmitted from one dog to another by mosquitoes when they bite an infected dog. Larvae develop and are then transmitted to another dog when that dog is bitten by the infected mosquito.

All dogs are at risk for heartworm disease, no matter where they live – heartworms don't discriminate based on geography. In the past, heartworm disease in the United States was primarily limited to the south and southeast regions. However, it is now found in all 50 states, in Canada, and worldwide, and is spreading to new areas each year. The American Heartworm Society notes that uncared-for dogs and certain wildlife can be carriers of heartworms. In our mobile society, heartworm positive dogs can spread the disease by traveling with their owners or being rescued in the South by well meaning people.

Heartworm disease is tested by a veterinarian to collecting a small blood sample from a dog and evaluating the sample using a specialized test kit that identifies the heartworm antigen.

Pet owners can use a monthly dewormer to keep their dog safe. The macrocyclic lactone medications (Heartgard Plus, Interceptor, etc) kill tissue larval stages of heartworms and helps prevent them from developing into adults and causing heartworm disease. That is why they only have to be taken once a month; there is reachback. Taking the chewable on June 1st kills all the larvae mosquitoes may have introduced since May 1st. In an unprotected dog, heartworm larvae that are transmitted by an infected, biting mosquito mature and ultimately migrate to the heart and important arteries.

Although it is possible to treat heartworm disease if a dog becomes infected, it is much preferable to prevent the disease, so no damage to the heart occurs. The treatment can be risky, particularly in dogs that have begun to exhibit clinical signs of infection.