



Heartworms

What is Heartworm Disease?

Heartworm disease is a serious and potentially fatal disease seen in dogs. Dogs acquire heartworms through the bite of an infected mosquito. The mosquito injects the parasite under the dog's skin when it bites to receive a blood meal. Over a six month period, the parasite's larvae travel throughout the dogs body until it reaches the heart, where it becomes an adult worm. The adult worm can grow to be 12-14 inches long and there can be just one or hundreds of worms present in the heart. The adult worm releases baby worms called microfilaria which are picked up by another mosquito through a blood meal, matures into a larvae and is injected into another dog. Left untreated, heartworms can cause fatal heart failure.

How can I tell if my dog has heartworms?

Without testing, you won't know until the disease has progressed far enough to cause serious damage to the dog's heart and lungs. That's because there are no visible symptoms of heartworm infection in the early stages. This is the reason our veterinarians seek out yearly heartworm tests.

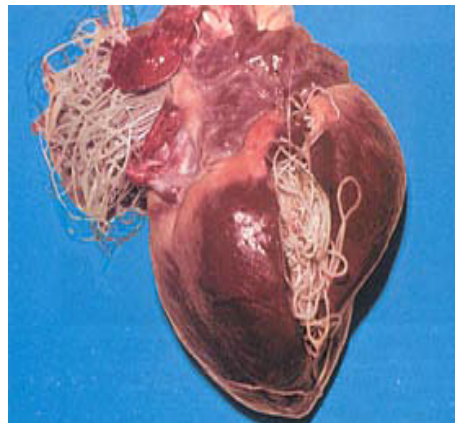
ADVANCED SYMPTOMS CAN INCLUDE:

- Chronic coughing
- Lethargy
- Difficulty breathing
- Reluctance to exercise or walk far
- Loss of appetite

Who is susceptible to heartworms? "My dog doesn't go outside."

All dogs, from Pomeranians to Pointers. That's because most dogs do go outdoors, even if it's only for a short time. And mosquitoes can easily slip inside homes through cracks around windows, doors or screens. That means that every dog is at risk, indoors or out.

What happens if my dog becomes infected?



For dogs diagnosed with heartworms that do not have symptoms of disease and for those with mild symptoms, treatment can be initiated immediately. The prognosis for these patients is very good. Dogs that show signs of advanced disease can often be treated but do have a more guarded prognosis.

The first step towards treatment of heartworms is assessing the dog's overall medical condition. This includes a thorough physical examination, extensive laboratory tests and chest x-rays. These tests tell our veterinarians how affected your dog is from the worms & gives them a better prognosis through treatment.

The second step is eliminating the adult heartworms. Our doctors may start your dog on an antibiotic to help prepare the body for the treatment as well as a mild steroid to decrease inflammation associated with the dying worms. Then, a series of three injections are given over a 2 month period to kill the adult worms. Our nursing staff will monitor your dog on the day of the injections to ensure no adverse reaction occurs.

Although complications are not common, they can be serious when they occur. It is vital to restrict the pets activity level for 30 days following each injection. It is during this time frame that the dead worms can break into small pieces, dislodge and cause a potentially life-threatening blockage of blood flow in the lungs. The chances of this happening are greatly decreased if the pet is confined. During this 2 month period of treatment, the pet should be watched closely for coughing, wheezing, depression and lack of appetite.