

Testing is Key for Heartworm Prevention

Your pet should be tested for heartworm infection before they are placed on a preventative to avoid any harmful or possibly fatal complications. If a heartworm-infected dog is started on a monthly preventative without testing, immature heartworms (called microfilariae which circulate in the bloodstream) are susceptible to the medication and may die suddenly, causing a serious, shock-type reaction, called anaphylaxis. This anaphylactic reaction may be fatal for the pet.

"Your dog may already have heartworm from last year. It takes roughly 6 months for a heartworm infection to develop to the point where it will trigger a positive test. So the testing THIS May or June will confirm whether your dog was infected last summer. Then we can begin THIS year's prevention treatment," says veterinarian Dr. Corey Bartley.

Annual testing is important, even when dogs are on heartworm prevention year-round, to ensure that the prevention program is working. Heartworm medications are highly effective, but dogs can still become infected. If you miss just one dose of a monthly medication - or give it late - it can leave your dog unprotected. Even if you give the medication as recommended, your dog may spit out or vomit a heartworm pill - or rub off a topical medication. Heartworm preventives are highly effective, but not 100 percent effective. If you don't get your dog tested, you won't know your dog needs treatment.

Mosquitoes Carry the Disease

Heartworms are parasites that live within the bloodstream and circulatory system. Although we mainly see heartworm disease in dogs, cat can also potentially be infected as well as other mammals. Heartworms are transmitted via mosquitos – something we see a lot of in Manitoba! A mosquito feeds from an infected animal, and as it sucks blood it also ingests the immature larval form of the worm (microfilariae). Later on when it has another meal on a new (uninfected) animal, the mosquito can actually deposit the microscopic larvae onto the animal near the bite wound, infecting them via their feeding site.

How Heartworm is Detected

Often dogs in the early stages of heartworm disease will show no symptoms. More advanced heartworm disease will cause changes to heart function leading to congestive heart failure. This is why early detection of the infection is so critical.

"The earlier heartworm is detected in an animal, the more likely we are to successfully treat and eliminate heartworm from the animal with minimal complications," says Dr. Bartley. "Luckily, blood tests are readily available at veterinary clinics across Manitoba to check for the presence of the parasite. The cost is affordable for pet owners"

How Heartworm is Prevented

If your dog tests positive for heartworm, don't panic! There is treatment for heartworm-infected dogs. Although the treatment can cause discomfort in some dogs and can be costly, many dogs are treated successfully and go on to lead normal lives.

Prevention is obviously much easier than treatment of infected animals. Typically prevention is either feeding a flavoured chew treat once a month, or applying a topical medication once a month. Dr. Bartley advises, "for pet owners who may have difficulty remembering the monthly administration, there is also a six-month injection of a preventative medication."

Contact your veterinarian to learn about testing and preventative options.