



HEARTWORM DISEASE

WHAT IS HEARTWORM?

Heartworm is a disease which affects dogs and is caused by white, threadlike worms, 6 to 14 inches long, living in a dog's heart. The symptoms of heartworm disease are chronic coughing, shortness of breath, lack of energy and collapse. These symptoms usually show up in the late stages of the disease.

HOW DOES A DOG DEVELOP HEARTWORM?

Heartworm disease is transmitted from an infected dog to an uninfected dog by a mosquito bite. The problem starts when a mosquito draws blood containing heartworm larvae from an infected dog. The larvae develop in the mosquito and when that insect takes another blood meal the larvae in it migrate into the skin wound created by the mosquito. The heartworm larvae migrate through the dog's system and develop for 2-3 months. They then arrive at the heart as immature adult worms. The female adult worms produce larvae, also called microfilaria, which circulate in the dog's blood stream. This whole process takes about 6 months. The annual heartworm test checks for these microfilaria. A separate test can detect adult worms even if microfilaria are not present.



IS HEARTWORM TREATABLE?

A dog with heartworm disease has a good chance of recovery if the disease is diagnosed and treated in its early stages. Early detection is the reason annual heartworm tests are advised.

WHAT ARE YOUR CHOICES?

Your dog cannot avoid exposure to mosquitoes; therefore, an annual blood test is the minimum precaution you should take for your dog. The best alternative is to have a blood test and then put your dog on heartworm preventative medicine, available from your veterinarian after your dog has tested negative. Keep in mind that it is much easier to prevent heartworm disease than it is to treat it.

WHAT IS THE BLOOD TESTING PROCEDURE?

Your dog's blood sample is taken in the veterinarian's office. This sample is examined in the laboratory for heartworm microfilaria and/or for heartworm antigen. Giving medication to a dog with heartworm has the potential to be dangerous. Never give the medication without your veterinarian's approval.

HEARTWORM PREVENTATIVE MEDICINE USAGE

The two forms of prevention currently used are monthly medications and an injectable medication that lasts for 6 months. The monthly preventative (Heartguard or Interceptor) is given every 30 days. Use a calendar reminder system. Give the medicine year-round and repeat the blood test with the annual vaccination. Talk to your vet before deciding which method to use.

Puppies under 6 months old can be started on medication without prior test.