



Blue Springs

Animal Hospital & Pet Resort

"It's All About Caring"



Heartworm Disease in Dogs: Prevention

Heartworm disease in dogs is a very serious disease caused by a large worm called *Dirofilaria immitis*. Immature heartworms live in mosquitoes and are spread to the animal when the mosquito feeds. The immature worms migrate from the site of the mosquito bite to the animal's heart. In the right side of the heart the worms mature, sometimes growing to lengths of 12-14 inches! As the worms grow, they plug the vessels in the heart and cause severe and permanent damage to the heart and lungs.

The signs of heartworm disease are not apparent until the heart has been severely affected. The signs include lethargy, coughing, and difficulty breathing. Untreated heartworm disease is usually fatal. Fortunately, highly effective medications are available to prevent heartworm disease.

In dogs, heartworm preventatives must NOT be given if the dogs already have heartworms. Severe and sometimes fatal reactions can occur. Therefore, any dogs older than 5 months old must have a blood test prior to starting the preventatives.

Heartworm preventatives must be given year round in this part of the country, as mosquitoes are prevalent here during all four seasons. This applies to both indoor and outdoor pets since mosquitoes often gain access indoors, even in the winter.

After initial testing and starting preventative, dogs should be tested once a year for heartworms. There are several important reasons for testing each year. First, to be most effective, the medications need to be given exactly on time, every time. One missed or late pill can give heartworms a chance to reach the heart, and once they are in the heart the preventatives are ineffective. Secondly, even if given on time, it is difficult to be sure that the dog kept the pill down and absorbed all of the medication. Drug absorption is variable from dog to dog and may account for the small number of dogs that get heartworm disease despite receiving regular preventative. Finally, if your dog has picked up heartworms, the prognosis is best if it is diagnosed and treated early, before signs appear. Yearly testing has saved many dogs' lives by detecting early cases of heartworm disease.

Because treatment for heartworm disease is difficult, potentially dangerous, and quite expensive, the proverbial "ounce of prevention" is very applicable to heartworm disease.

Administering heartworm preventative:

1. If your dog is older than 5 months, it must be blood tested before starting preventative.
2. The dose of preventative will be based on your dog's weight. Please call us if your dog's weight changes enough that it no longer falls within the weight limits listed on the package.
3. It is very important that the medications are given on the same day each month. Please call the doctor if the pills cannot be given or are missed.
4. Heartworm preventative must be given year round. Please stop by the office and pick up another package when your prescription is finished.

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