



**Good Friends
Animal
Hospital**

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Heartworm Disease

Heartworm disease is caused by *Dirofilaria immitis*, a 12-inch long worm which lives in the heart. The worm is spread by mosquitoes so all pets are at risk. When an infected mosquito bites an animal, larvae (the immature forms) are injected into the skin. The larvae migrate through the body for several months and go through molting stages. The larvae then enter the bloodstream and travel to the heart. This is where they develop into adults. Female worms produce microfilaria, the babies which are in the blood stream waiting to be picked up by another mosquito. This whole process takes about 6 months.

Heartworms can cause a variety of symptoms, most of which are due to their large size obstructing the blood flow in the heart. At the beginning the pet will appear normal. As the heart deteriorates, your pet will develop a cough and tire easily. Eventually heart failure may result. Cats may have chronic episodes of vomiting or die suddenly.

Heartworm disease in dogs can be treated but the only available drug for the adults is an arsenic compound. Complications from the drug as well as from the dying worms are possible. There is no safe treatment for cats. Therefore, it is much better to prevent heartworms than to treat them.

Prevention can be done with a monthly medication. The medication will kill larvae in a variety of stages. It will kill any larvae which have gotten into your pet's body during the previous month. The medicine does not last for a month in your pet's body, and there is no protection after the medication is given.

Before starting preventive medication, dogs need to have a blood test to make sure heartworms are not present. Even if your dog is taking preventive medicine now, he may still need a blood test. Dogs which start on preventive medicine during heartworm season could have heartworms which are not detected by testing at that time due to the 6 month development period. Dogs can also change weight or not eat their medicine, leaving them at risk so regular testing is important. Cats do not need the routine testing.

Heartworm disease is a serious and potentially fatal disease. It is also easy to prevent. Routine testing and regular preventive medication are a necessary part of your pet's health care, and an investment in a long life.