

Heartworm Disease

Heartworms are a parasite of dogs and other canines, such as coyotes and foxes. Cats can also be affected, although they are more resistant and can often fight off the worms themselves.

Heartworms are transmitted by mosquitoes. Mosquitoes bite an infected animal and pick up heartworm larvae. The mosquitoes then inject these L2 larvae into the next animal they bite. The larvae then develop into adults over the next 6 months. The adult worms live in the arteries of the lungs and in the heart.

Heartworms can cause harm in two ways. They block normal bloodflow, causing excessive workload on the heart, and they also damage the inner lining of the blood vessels, which can lead to blood clots in the lungs. Adult heartworms reproduce and make more larvae.

***Symptoms***

Dogs infected with a few worms may not show any outward signs of infection. More heavily infected dogs will cough and tire easily with exercise. Severe infections may cause weight loss and fluid accumulation in the abdomen, a result of congestive heart failure.

***Diagnosis***

A 4Dx SNAP test is run at the clinic for routine screening as well as for suspect animals. If this test is positive, we will examine a drop of blood under the microscope for larvae. Presence of larvae in the blood confirms the infection. Additional testing may be done to stage the infection, determining how severe it is. This may include chest x-rays and other bloodwork.

***Treatment***

Treatment is recommended for all dogs that do not have other complicating medication conditions. It consists of several different components:

* Monthly heartworm prevention that will be continued for life. This will kill larvae in the bloodstream.
* Doxycycline: Antibiotic that kills Wohlbachia bacteria, which lives symbiotically with heartworms. This helps to make the worms more susceptible to treatment.
* Melarsomine injections: Three separate injections that are intended to kill the adult worms. The three-injection series is 99% effective at clearing heartworm infections.
* Each injection will be preceded by a week of a steroid called Prednisone to minimize the chances of adverse reactions to the treatment.
* Exercise restriction: It is **critically important** to keep the dog strictly confined and eliminate ALL exercise once treatment has been started. Exercising can lead to clumps of worms blocking circulation to the lungs, which can cause sudden death. ALL physical activity must be stopped except three 3- to 5-minute leash walks for bathroom breaks every day. This must be continued for at least 6 weeks after the last injection.

A personalized schedule for treatment will be given to you for your dog. It is extremely important to follow all recommendations to make your pet’s road to recovery as smooth as possible.

***Monitoring***

Monitor your pet throughout the treatment period and after for the signs previously listed: coughing, tiring easily with exercise, weight loss, and fluid accumulation in the abdomen. After each injection, your dog should be monitored closely for signs of shock and any other adverse reactions.

If at any point you have questions or concerns, please contact us at 319-837-6511.