

Heartworm Disease In Dogs and Cats

Household pets can be hosts to many different parasitic organisms, internally and externally. A parasite that is potentially lethal occurs in both dogs and cats in Southern California. This parasite was not found west of the Rockies for many years, but as long ago as the 1980s it began its insidious and silent migration to the west coast. The parasite is the heartworm, its hosts are dogs and cats, and its carrier is the mosquito. Heartworm disease is also found in coyotes, foxes, and wolves and these wild animals serve as a reservoir for our pets.

Dogs and cats become infected when they are bitten by a mosquito that carries the larvae. After the bite, it takes about 7 months for the larvae to develop into adult worms that live in the heart, filling the chambers, obstructing blood flow and causing blood clots to form. A heavy infection can be fatal. In cats, 2 worms are enough to cause the death of the cat. The worms can get up to 7 inches long. The treatment is unpleasant and has some risk as well, and in dogs consists of several doses of an arsenic compound. There is no specific treatment for cats. The adult worms lay eggs in the blood and these hatch into microscopic organisms called microfilaria. When a mosquito bites the infected dog or cat, it ingests the microfilaria in the blood and becomes infected.

The best way to protect your dog and cat is to start giving the preventive at 2-3 months of age and continue for life of your pet. There are oral monthly tablets and spot-on products that protect your pet for one month per dose. They should be given year-round as mosquitoes can be present any time of the year in our climate. Heartworm preventatives are usually combined with products that treat pets for roundworms, hookworms, and whipworms, and sometimes external parasites too. Dogs should be tested every year to make sure an infection hasn't occurred. Because heartworm tests for cats are not always reliable, the disease is commonly underdiagnosed. Sometime, sudden death is the only sign.

Your veterinarian is the best person to educate you about parasitic diseases in pets, the risks parasites present to people, and prevention strategies. The use of combination products that cover multiple parasitic organisms makes heartworm prevention simple and economical.