

Heartworm Disease in Pets

Heartworm (*Dirofilaria immitis*) is a serious and potentially life-threatening parasite that affects the heart, lungs, and surrounding blood vessels of pets. While dogs are the most common hosts, cats and other mammals (including ferrets and wild animals) can also be infected. The disease is spread through the bite of a mosquito, making it a risk wherever mosquitoes are present.

How Transmission Happens

- When a mosquito bites an infected animal, it picks up microscopic baby worms, known as microfilariae.
- These larvae develop inside the mosquito and are then transmitted when the mosquito bites another host.
- Once inside, the larvae travel through the bloodstream, maturing into adult worms that lodge in the heart, lungs, and blood vessels—causing inflammation, damage, and potentially leading to heart failure.

Signs in Dogs

Dogs are natural hosts for heartworm, which means the worms can live for years inside them. Symptoms often worsen gradually:

- Persistent coughing
- Lethargy and decreased willingness to exercise
- Difficulty breathing
- Weight loss and loss of appetite
- Swollen abdomen (from fluid build-up due to heart failure)
- In severe cases: collapse or sudden death

Signs in Cats

Cats are atypical hosts, so they usually carry fewer worms—but even a single worm can cause severe damage. Signs are often more subtle and can mimic other illnesses:

- Vomiting not related to eating
- Coughing or asthma-like episodes
- Difficulty breathing
- Lethargy or loss of appetite
- In some cases, the first and only sign may be sudden collapse or death

Diagnosis

- Dogs: Blood tests detect heartworm proteins or microfilariae, often supported by X-rays or ultrasound.
- Cats: Diagnosis is more challenging, as standard tests are less reliable. Veterinarians may combine multiple tests with imaging to reach a conclusion.

Treatment

- Dogs: Treatment involves a series of injections to kill adult worms, plus medications to stabilize the pet. While effective, treatment can be costly, lengthy, and carries risks due to the worms breaking down in the bloodstream.
- Cats: No approved treatment exists for adult heartworms in cats. Supportive care (such as steroids to reduce inflammation) may help manage symptoms, but prevention is the only safe strategy.

Prevention (The Best Medicine)


The good news is that heartworm disease is almost entirely preventable. Options include:

- Monthly oral tablets or chews
- Monthly topical medications
- 6–12 month injectable preventives (for dogs)

Many products also protect against other parasites, such as fleas, ticks, and intestinal worms—making prevention an easy, all-in-one safeguard.

Why It Matters

Once heartworm is established, it's much more complicated—and riskier—to treat than to prevent. That's why veterinarians strongly recommend year-round heartworm prevention, even for indoor pets, since mosquitoes can find their way indoors.

 **Remember: One mosquito bite is all it takes. Prevention saves lives.** 