

April is Heartworm Awareness Month

Unless you're a veterinarian, the name *Dirofilaria immitis* might sound unfamiliar to you, but the health of your pet may depend on your understanding of this common parasite. *D. immitis* is the Latin name for heartworm, a parasitic worm that affects the health of thousands of pets annually—including dogs, cats, and ferrets—and even some wild animals like foxes and wolves. If left untreated, the effects of heartworm can be dangerous and potentially fatal to your pet.

To help raise awareness of heartworm disease and to promote early diagnosis and treatment, April has been designated National Heartworm Awareness Month. The American Heartworm Society urges all pet owners to educate themselves on heartworm prevention to help reduce the number of cases seen in the U.S. annually.



What Exactly is a Heartworm?

Heartworms are parasitic organisms that can reach 10–12 inches in length. These worms live within the chambers of the heart, as well as within the adjacent blood vessels. An individual worm can survive 5–7 years. Heartworms reproduce within the host animal, and a single dog can host up to 250 worms. Over time, the worms impair heart and lung function, and in severe cases, can result in death.

In cats, which are not the ideal hosts for the parasite, the disease course is different. Heartworms do not typically reach maturity in cats, and typically an affected cat will have only 2 to 3 immature worms. These immature worms can still damage your cat's heart and lungs, but the presence of heartworms can be harder to detect in cats.

How is Heartworm Transmitted?

Heartworm is a vector-borne disease that is transmitted by mosquitoes. An insect that feeds on an infected animal can then transmit the parasite to an uninfected animal that it bites subsequently. Once the parasite's larvae infect a new host, it can take about 6 months for heartworms to reach adult, reproductive age.

What Are the Signs and Symptoms of Heartworm?

Early in the disease course, your pet may be asymptomatic, which makes heartworm tricky to diagnose. As the disease progresses, your dog may experience:

- persistent cough
- reluctance to exercise
- fatigue
- appetite loss
- weight loss

Some dogs also experience difficulty walking, fainting, seizures, or abdominal bloating. In many cases, however, the disease progresses without producing significant symptoms until its late stage, when fatality is likely.

In cats, heartworm can cause:

- persistent cough
- asthma-like attacks
- vomiting
- loss of appetite
- weight loss.

How Can You Prevent Heartworm in Your Pets?

If this all sounds pretty scary, it is. Heartworm is a serious condition. Fortunately, there are some steps you can take to help prevent, diagnose, and treat heartworm in your pet.

Get Your Pet Tested

All pets should undergo annual heartworm testing. The test requires a blood sample to conduct an antigen test. This detects proteins produced by the parasite within your pet's

bloodstream. Puppies that are under 7 months of age can be started on a heartworm preventative without the need for a blood test. Dogs older than 7 months should be tested before beginning any heartworm preventive regimen.

For cats, the process is somewhat different. Because heartworms are less common and harder to detect in cats, your vet may use other means, such as x-ray and ultrasound, to detect the presence of the parasite in felines. Blood tests for parasite antigens are also performed in cats.

Heartworm Preventives

A range of prescription heartworm prevention treatments are available. If your pet tests negative, check with your vet to see which preventive they recommend.

Treatment

If your pet tests positive for heartworm, your vet will likely recommend a treatment course based on the overall condition and health history of your animal. If your pet has advanced heartworm disease, your vet may ask you to restrict your animal's activity, or to administer medications that will stabilize your animal's condition before heartworm treatment can begin.

To kill adult heartworms, your vet may administer a drug called melarsomine, given by injection at your vet's office. Subsequent testing will determine the success of the treatment. If the worms are not eradicated, additional treatment may be needed. There is currently no drug treatment for cats with heartworm disease, and care is largely supportive.

Conclusion

We hope this quick review will help you better understand the importance of getting your pet tested for heartworms. At Coronado Veterinary Hospital, we understand how important your pet's health is to you. Our trained and compassionate staff can help explain the risks of heartworm disease, can conduct heartworm tests, and can administer treatment if your pet tests positive for the parasite. Make an appointment today—we're ready and eager to help!