

Understanding Heartworm Disease in Our Pets

As the weather continues to warm up, it is important to talk about the impact of heartworm disease on our pet population. Heartworm disease is a serious and potentially fatal disease in pets that has been diagnosed in all 50 states. Heartworms are parasites transmitted by mosquitoes that have fed on a heartworm positive animal. After the larva is transmitted through the bite of a mosquito, it matures in the heart, lungs and associated blood vessels of the affected pet. This then causes potentially very severe lung disease, heart failure and even damage to other organs in the body. Heartworm disease affects dogs, cats and ferrets, but can also live in other mammals such as wolves, coyotes, foxes, sea lions and in rare instances humans. Because some wild animals live in close proximity to many urbanized areas, they are considered important carriers of the disease.

The dog is a natural host for heartworms, meaning the entire life cycle of the parasite can take place inside that animal. Heartworm disease causes lasting damage to the heart and lungs, therefore affecting the dog's health and quality of life long after the parasites are gone. For this reason, prevention is by far the best option, and treatment- when needed- should be administered as early in the course of the disease as possible.

Heartworm disease in cats is very different from heartworm disease in dogs. The cat is not a natural host for heartworms; so many worms do not survive to the adult stage when a cat is infected. Due to the low numbers of adult worms, it makes diagnosing the disease difficult in cats. However, it's important to understand that even immature worms can cause severe damage. Infected cats can suffer from a condition known as Heartworm Associated Respiratory Disease, which is a fatal reaction by the lungs to the parasitic worms. The medication used to treat heartworm infections in dogs cannot be used in cats, so prevention is the only means of protecting cats from the effects of heartworm disease.

Any pet, even one that lives its entire life indoors, is capable of getting heartworm disease year round due to the prevalence of mosquitoes in our area. Feel free to ask your veterinarian about heartworm testing and prevention options to ensure your pets are protected.