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Heartworm Disease

What is Heartworm Disease?

Heartworm disease is a severe condition caused by worms living in the arteries of the lungs and right side of the heart. Animal species that can be infected include dogs, cats, wolves, foxes, ferrets and sea lions. Dogs and cats of any age or breed can become infected.

What are signs of Heartworm Disease?

Clinical signs may not be observed during the early period of infection. Signs are associated with damage to the heart and lungs. As the worms grow and multiply, common clinical signs include coughing, reluctance to exercise, tiring easily after exercise, decreased appetite and weight loss.

How does an animal contract Heartworm Disease?

Adult worms release thousands of young worms called microfilariae into the animal's bloodstream. When a mosquito feeds on an infected animal it then carries the young worms to the next host. The mosquito is needed for the young worms to develop. When the mosquito bites the next animal the worms enter through the bite, and within six months they mature into adult worms in the arteries of the lungs and the right side of the heart. Worms can live up to seven years. It is common to find more than 30 adult worms in an infected dog.

How do I tell if my pet has Heartworm Disease?

There is a simple blood test for dogs called the 4dx test that tests for a heartworm substance called an antigen in the blood. Your veterinarian can best determine what type of testing schedule is best for your dog. Most dogs should be tested every year. After an animal is diagnosed, x-rays of the chest and additional blood tests may be necessary to accurately tell how severe of an infection exists. Cats are more difficult to test for heartworm disease because they commonly only have 1-2 worms. However, there are blood tests available for cats that are sent to a laboratory for analysis.

Is Heartworm Disease Treatable?

Adult heartworms can be killed with a drug called an adulticide. This drug is injected into the muscle and is typically a 2-3 treatment schedule over 2 month's time. During the recovery period the dog must have very limited exercise to prevent fatal side effects of the adult worms dying off. The treatment of heartworm disease can cost hundreds of dollars. There is no safe way to kill adult worms in cats, besides surgically removing the worms.

How do I prevent Heartworm disease?

Your veterinarian can best determine an effective prevention protocol for your animals. There are many products available, including monthly, chewable medication and liquid topicals. These products are extremely effective when used on a timely schedule. The cost of monthly prevention is far less than the treatment of heartworm disease. This is especially the case in large breed dogs where the treatment can be over \$500 or more. It is the pet owner's responsibility to maintain the program your veterinarian has selected.

Websites to learn more.

www.heartwormsociety.org

Disclaimer: This written content is meant to be educational and is not medical advice. Always consult a veterinarian about medical advice for your pet.