

Heartworm

What is Heartworm?

Heartworm is a serious disease, caused by large worms that live in the heart and lungs of affected dogs. Over time these worms cause lung disease, damage to other organs, and eventually heart failure. Heartworm is spread between dogs by mosquitoes. The adult worms produce tiny baby worms, called microfilaria, that live in the bloodstream. When a mosquito bites an infected dog, it ingests some of these baby worms and passes them on to the next dog it bites. It then takes 6 months for the baby worms to mature into adults.

Can I Prevent my Dog from Catching Heartworm?

Heartworm treatment, described below, is quite difficult and expensive, so prevention is a much better option. There are pills available that, when given to your dog on a strict monthly schedule, will kill any baby worms in their bloodstream before they have a chance to mature and cause damage. The pill you need will depend on the size of your dog. Please ask us at Jasper's Utila Animal Shelter for advice and to get the preventative pills your dog needs.

Does my Dog Have Heartworm?

In the early stages of heartworm, most dogs show no symptoms at all. As it progresses, they may develop a persistent cough, reluctance to exercise, decreased appetite, and weight loss. If left untreated, your dog will eventually collapse and suffer severe heart failure. Heartworm can be detected using a simple blood test, available with Jasper's Utila Animal Shelter. A small blood sample is taken from your dog's leg, and the results are available within 10 minutes. It is advised that you test your dog once a year, even if you are using preventative pills. Catching the disease early before any symptoms appear significantly increases the chance of successful treatment.

Heartworm Treatment

Treatment for heartworm disease takes 3 to 4 months and is given in 3 stages. During the treatment you will need to restrict your dogs exercise as much as possible, as a raised heart rate during certain times in the treatment can cause severe organ damage and potentially be fatal. The first stage is a course of doxycycline antibiotic tablets, to be given once a day for 30 days. The antibiotic weakens the adult worms and makes the next stage of treatment easier. Doxycycline is available from a veterinarian or from a number of stores on Utila. The dose will depend on the size of your dog. At this stage, you should also start heartworm preventative pills every month to kill the baby worms in your dog's blood. After the 30 days of antibiotics, your dog will need to go to the vet for an injection of Melarsomine. This is a drug that kills the adult worms living in the heart and lungs. After this injection it is essential that you restrict your dog's activity as much as possible. An increased heart rate could dislodge an adult worm before it has died and broken apart, which could cause the blockage of vital blood vessels and be very serious or fatal. After another 30 days, your dog will return to the vet for two injections of Melarsomine. One injection is given,

and then the second is given 24 hours later. It is still very important to restrict your dog's activity to avoid complications with the treatment. You should take your dog to be checked by the vet 30 days after the final Melarsomine injection. They may do some more tests, advise on whether further medication is needed, and recommend a schedule for gradually increasing your dog's activity. Your dog should be retested for heartworm 6 months after this check up to make sure the treatment was successful. Continue with the monthly preventative pills throughout this time.