

HEARTWORM DISEASE: 'TIS THE SEASON

No, it's not Christmas, not with the summer-like temperatures we have suddenly had upon us. It is the season for the prevention of heartworm disease. Exactly what is heartworm disease and what do we need to do about it?

Heartworm disease is the end result of the life cycle of the heartworm parasite. First, a mosquito bites a dog and sucks in blood with microfilaria (immature heartworm organisms) in it. The microfilariae develop into larval stage heartworms within the mosquito. The mosquito then transmits the larval microfilaria by biting a healthy dog. The microscopic larvae then migrate through various tissues and end up in the heart. There they grow as large as 12 inches long. Left untreated the effects of the worms in the heart can be fatal. They affect the heart and lungs of dogs as young as 4 to 6 months of age and cause eventual heart failure.

How is the disease detected? There are several types of diagnostic tests that veterinarians perform. One type is to take a drop of blood and look for microfilaria directly. This test is less accurate than other blood concentrating tests that use a centrifuge and filters. These types of tests are only about 70 to 80% accurate. Blood antibody tests have been developed but would be positive and show exposure even if the heartworms were naturally resolved or medically treated. Eventually tests were developed that test for the antigens of the mature female heartworm. Thus occult heartworm tests today are highly accurate in detection of this parasite problem. Veterinarians use one or more of these tests to diagnose this problem, depending upon the locale and incidence of the disease.

What are the signs of this disease? If your dog shows signs of tiring easily, weight loss, changes in hair coat, difficulty breathing or coughing; heartworm disease should be considered a possible cause. Generally dogs do not have symptoms until late in the course of the disease. Thus it is the intent with this problem to prevent it or detect it early, rather than treat the sequence of adult worm infestation.

How is it prevented? A once a month medication containing a microfilaricide such as monthly Heartguard, is given to dogs during the mosquito season. Its administration will kill microfilaria. Heartworm blood testing must be performed prior to administration to check for the possibility of adult heartworms. A potentially fatal reaction can occur if it is administered and the adults are present in the blood. Some heartworm preventatives also contain other medications that prevent intestinal worms and/or fleas as well as heartworms.