

HEARTWORM DISEASE

Canine Heartworm Disease

Heartworms are the most life-threatening of parasites a dog can be infected with. Dogs are infected when they are bitten by mosquitoes carrying immature forms of heartworms called larvae. The larvae then travel in the dog's blood stream and eventually mature into adult heartworms in the heart. The adults live and breed in the heart of the dog. The worms can grow up to 14 inches leading to heart valve damage and partial obstruction leading to restricted blood flow through the infected chambers and vessels. Heartworm infections can be found in most parts of the United States. Treating a dog with mature heartworms can be dangerous so emphasis is placed on prevention. Daily or monthly heartworm prevention is aimed at killing the larvae in the blood stream BEFORE they mature into adults and settle in the heart.

Symptoms

- Soft non-productive cough
- Exercise intolerance

Diagnosis-Dogs should be screened yearly even if on heartworm preventative medications

- Filter test- looking for immature larvae forms in the blood
- Serology- testing blood for antibodies against heartworms and/or antigen test- looking for proteins specific to the heartworm organism itself.

Treatment

In most cases heartworm disease is treated medically by giving a drug that slowly kills the worms over a period of time- called an "adulticide". With too fast a kill, one risks obstruction of the smaller vessels to the lungs caused by the dead worms. Respiratory problems are always a risk of therapy even with a slow kills. Dogs should be hospitalized and monitored at all times if being treated for adult heartworms.

In severely infected dogs, surgery is sometimes performed before the drug is given to manually removal a large number of the worms and thereby reducing the risk of serious complications.

Adulticide therapy is followed by several weeks of preventative therapy to kill any remaining immature forms in the blood stream. The dog is re-tested for heartworm in 6-8 weeks and if negative, is placed on preventative medicine.

Prognosis

Good to excellent based on size and load of heart worms.