

Heartworm – Disease and Prevention

What is heartworm? Why is it important for me to know as a pet owner? Heartworm is a parasite spread by mosquitoes. Dogs are the primary host, but also cats, ferrets, some wild mammals and rarely humans.

A mosquito bites an infected animal and within 2 weeks bites a second animal and transmits heartworm larvae. The larvae grow and travel to the heart where they complete their lives. After 6-7 months from the initial bite, the new adult heartworms start to produce new offspring, releasing them into the dog's bloodstream, perpetuating the cycle. If there are enough worms within one heart they can lead to chronic coughing and respiratory disease and/or debilitating heart disease, potentially even heart failure. In a cat just a single worm can cause severe heart and lung disease.

Heartworm has been found in all 50 states, but is more prevalent in warmer, moister climates. The American Heartworm Society has a map showing where heartworm is found and to what extent (www.heartwormsociety.org). In more recent years heartworm has been found in Idaho native dogs due to infected dogs from other states moving to the area and transmitting it to our population.

Treatment for heartworm infection differs by species. Dogs are treated with multiple injections of a medicinal form of arsenic that will kill these worms. This treatment requires careful monitoring by the veterinarian as it can potentially be harmful to the dog. Heartworms cannot be killed safely this way in cats and ferrets. Killing even a single worm in either species could cause a fatal blockage in the blood vessels of the lungs. Heartworm treatment in cats and ferrets involves medication to help with inflammation and either continuing or adding preventative medication. This treatment is meant to keep the cat or ferret as healthy as possible while the existing worm(s) die on their own.

Preventing heartworm disease is relatively simple. Monthly medication can keep your pet heartworm free. Prior to starting preventative medication, a blood test is run to make sure that your dog is free of heartworm. (Some of the heartworm preventatives could be harmful if given to a dog with current infection.) Puppies under six months of age are not tested since heartworms take 6-7 months to reach maturity and would not yet be detectable. Annual testing is recommended by the CPAC (Companion Animal Parasite Council, www.cpacvet.org) regardless of whether or not prevention is used, in case of any possible break in dosing or effectiveness of the medication. Cats can also be tested with a simple blood test, although testing is not as accurate for them as it is for dogs.

At Intermountain Pet we recommend heartworm preventative medication for **all** dogs and any cats or ferrets with outside access or that travel to areas of heavy heartworm infestation (southern states, esp. the southeastern US). The heartworm preventatives we recommend also double as intestinal parasite and flea prevention. Since intestinal parasites and fleas can be a year-round concern, we recommend using them 12 months a year. These preventatives are available in either a chewable treat (Interceptor) or a liquid applied to the skin (Revolution). We do not recommend mosquito repellants as prevention since these may not prevent bites 100%. It only takes one bite!