



FACT SHEET

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Heartworm in Dayton, OH

Many people have questions about the risk to their dogs from canine heartworm infection. The emphasis on heartworm prevention increased several years ago due to the development of "once-a-month" medication instead of the previous *daily* medication requirement. This resulted in much greater acceptance of the use of preventive measures. This increase in emphasis and awareness has also caused some misunderstanding regarding the degree of risk to dogs in this area. Ironically, as the routine use of heartworm preventives has increased, and the overall incidence of heartworm has decreased, more misconceptions about heartworm risks have emerged.

* We are not considered a "high risk" heartworm area. Heartworm is transmitted by mosquitoes, and although we have plenty of those in the warm months, we do not have a large population of heartworm-infested dogs to serve as a source of larvae. However, wild canids (such as coyotes, which are present in this area in increasing numbers) and strays or neglected domestic dogs, can be reservoirs of larvae. We usually find a few cases each year while screening dogs for the preventive medication. Given the convenience of current medications, we recommend the preventive for most dogs.

* Heartworm can be treated (the sooner the better, before symptoms and/or damage appear), but prevention is much safer, simpler and less expensive.

* *ANY* dog can be exposed. Certainly, the longer or more often a dog is outside, the more potential for exposure exists. However, even "indoor" dogs go outside for toilet reasons, and more often than not, they do so in the morning and evening hours when mosquitoes may be active. It is not how many mosquitoes bite that determines exposure, it is which mosquitoes bite.

* Dogs must have a simple blood test, to confirm that they are not already infected, before starting the preventive medication. Dogs under 6 months of age are typically not tested because the heartworm life cycle takes 6-9 months to complete, making the test invalid as a screening method in very young dogs. Official protocols recommend re-testing dogs every other year if they receive their preventive medication as scheduled, and every year if several doses of medication were missed in the prior year.

* The monthly preventive medication works "backwards", killing larvae in their migration stage, so medication must start within one month of exposure and continue for one month after the last exposure. Although it is given once a month, it is only present in the dog's system for a day, which is long enough to kill the susceptible larvae. Published guidelines recommend year round treatment. Since the medication we use controls three of the most common types of intestinal worms, as well as preventing heartworms, we have recommended year round usage since 1997.

* Recently an injectable preventive was introduced. This product was used successfully in Australia for several years prior to its use here, but has since been voluntarily withdrawn from the market by the manufacturer. In contrast to the oral products, it was a long-duration, slow-release product that remained in the dog for 6 months, and did not control intestinal parasites as well as other products.

* Cats have some increased susceptibility to Canine Heartworm (over other "atypical" hosts) and some authorities recommend that cats be on heartworm preventive medication. Due to the expected very low incidence in cats, it is harder for us to recommend the routine use of preventive medication in them, but would not discourage its use by concerned owners. Cats take the same medication as dogs, but the dose is different.