
Heartworm in Dayton, Ohio

Many people have questions about the risk to their dogs from canine heartworm infestation. The emphasis on heartworm prevention increased due to the development of a “once a month” medication instead of the previous daily medication requirement.

The Truth about Heartworm Risks in our Area

We are **not** considered a “high risk” heartworm area. Heartworm is transmitted by mosquitoes, and although we have plenty of mosquitoes 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 all 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.** The longer or the 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 infested,** before starting the preventative 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 preventative 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 one 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.
- **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.