

ORCHARD HILLS VETERINARY HOSPITAL

Heartworm

Heartworm disease primarily affects dogs, but can also affect cats. If left untreated it can significantly damage the heart, lungs, and other organs. The Heartworm infection is **transmitted** through mosquito bites: a mosquito bites an infected dog and ingests heartworm larvae (microfilaria), which are passed to the next dog it bites. Microfilaria penetrates the dog's skin and travel through the body to the heart. It usually takes a few months for the infection to reach the heart; once there, the worms can grow to 14 inches.

Common **symptoms** of heartworm infection in dogs include:

- Coughing
- Diminished strength and vitality
- Unexplained weight loss
- Lethargy

Severe infestation can cause sudden death. Heartworms can

- obstruct the heart chambers and blood vessels,
- lead to the development of pulmonary hypertension (high blood pressure), and
- cause heart failure.

Diagnosis

A simple blood sample is taken to determine the presence of heartworm. This is a quick 15 minute procedure, done whilst you wait, however if your dog starts on preventatives as a puppy this test is not necessary.

Treatment

If your dog is diagnosed with heartworm the treatment can be complex and side effects are common. Dogs are also left with permanent lung & heart damage. Prevention is always better than the cure.

Preventative

Preventative medications are available as monthly tablets, spot on products or an annual injection. All **reputable** products are totally reliable if used correctly. Please talk to us about the right product for your pet.

Cats and heartworm

Cats are not natural hosts for heartworms and the risk for infection is lower than in dogs; however, cats can develop heartworm disease. Heartworms can cause severe reactions and death in cats. Heartworm infection in cats occurs more often in warm climates and in areas where dogs are at an increased risk.

Symptoms

Symptoms of heartworm in cats include the following:

- Breathing difficulties
- Coughing
- Lethargy
- Vomiting
- Weight loss

These symptoms are easily confused with other disorders, especially bronchial asthma, making feline heartworm infection difficult to diagnose.

There is no approved product for treating heartworm infection in cats. Infected cats may suffer symptoms and die even after treatment.

Pet owners who are concerned about heartworm infection should discuss **prevention** with their veterinarian. A monthly preventative medicine is available.