

## Heartworm Disease in Dogs and Cats: The Facts

Heartworms are a parasitic worm (about the diameter of thin spaghetti) that normally live free floating in the right ventricle of the heart and nearby blood vessels. The parasites are transmitted from one individual to another by **mosquitoes**.

- \* Heartworm is diagnosed with blood tests, and/or X-rays, along with other tests.
- \* Heartworms are not detectable with the commonly used antigen blood test until they are sexually mature (about 6 months after entering the patient). Female worms must be present for accurate test results.
- \* Heartworm has been diagnosed in all 50 states and also worldwide. In most areas of the country Heartworm is an important pet health care issue.
- \* In Florida, veterinarians recommend Heartworm prevention for dogs and cats all year round! Preventative measures in cats is becoming more common as veterinarians continue to educate clients more about the parasite in cats, and as they become skilled at recognizing the fatal results of the disease in cats.
- \* Dogs should be tested FIRST... before starting heartworm preventative, unless they are less than 7 months old.
- \* Dog's over 7 months of age that are started on preventative without first testing for Heartworm can be at an increased risk of developing severe reactions.
- \* Puppies can be started on Heartworm preventative by 8 weeks of age (depending on the product being used) and then blood tested at 7 months of age.
- \* As a general rule, dogs should be tested on a regular basis, yearly if any doses of preventative have been missed and once every 2-3 years even if no doses were missed and preventative is given year around.
- \* In the cat, the presence of Heartworm is difficult to detect with a blood test alone. Preventative medication is often started without testing unless signs of Heartworm infection are noticed.
- \* In cats, **one worm can cause sudden death or sudden (acute) respiratory signs** that are indistinguishable from asthma or other heart diseases without a medical work up.
- \* Any area where dogs can get Heartworm, cats can get them as well: in other words, HERE, ALL YEAR.

Please mark your calendars, give monthly preventative year-round here in Florida, to cats as well. If not currently on a preventative, see your veterinarian for a heartworm test, and to get started for life. Call your vet for questions and education about this disease and its treatment. Compare the cost of preventative to the cost of treatment if a pet gets heartworms. Know that treatment, once positive, CAN BE FATAL; there is no good treatment for heartworm positive cats, unfortunately.