

Heartworm Disease in Dogs



Questions & Answers



What causes heartworm disease?

Heartworm disease is caused by a parasite called "*Dirofilaria immitis*." Heartworms are most commonly found in dogs. However, they can infect a wide variety of mammals including cats, ferrets, sea lions, bears, foxes, wolves, coyotes, and even people. Adult heartworms generally live in the heart and major arteries of the lungs, although they may be found in other areas of the body.



Are all dogs at risk?

Dogs are considered the preferred host of the heartworm. While the highest prevalence of heartworm infection is in areas with heavy mosquito populations, heartworm-infected animals can be found in all environments making heartworm disease a health consideration regardless of where you live. Ask your veterinarian for recommendations regarding testing and preventing this disease in your pet.

How are heartworms transmitted?

Heartworms can only be transmitted from one animal to another by mosquitoes. Adult worms produce microfilariae (small, immature heartworms) which may be found in the blood of infected dogs. The mosquito ingests heartworm microfilariae when biting an infected host (usually a dog). The microfilariae develop in the mosquito into "infective larvae" and are deposited with saliva on the dog's skin as the mosquito is feeding. The infective larvae pass through the skin and migrate through the body tissues.

CANINE HEARTWORM LIFE CYCLE



What are the signs of heartworm disease in dogs?

Many dogs infected with heartworms may not show any evidence of infection in the early stages of the disease. Signs may appear eventually and may worsen over time. Early detection is important in managing your pet's health.

Initially, dogs may exhibit a decreased tolerance to exercise. They may also develop a cough, experience difficulty breathing or have fainting spells as well as suffer severe weight loss. Since the heart and lungs are affected, the clinical signs observed are typical of heart failure, pneumonia or other debilitating disease.

How do I know if my dog has heartworms?

Routine testing for heartworm infection is performed in affected areas. An in-hospital blood test has been developed to aid in the diagnosis of heartworm infections in dogs. Ask your veterinarian about the Solo Step® CH Canine Heartworm Test from Heska. Additional testing may also be indicated.

My dog rarely goes outside. Can it be infected with heartworms?

Yes, heartworm infections have been reported in dogs that rarely go outside. If a mosquito carrying heartworm infective larvae enters the house, it can bite your dog and the larvae may infect your dog. In addition, most dogs make frequent short trips outside, during which mosquito bites may occur.



When do veterinarians recommend testing for heartworm infection?

Veterinarians recommend testing for heartworm infection before beginning heartworm preventive medication, at regular intervals after the dog is on a preventive medication and when dogs have clinical signs suggestive of heartworm disease. Testing may be recommended as part of the annual physical examination.

Can canine heartworm disease be prevented?

Fortunately, heartworm disease can be prevented, if preventive medications are started early and are consistently given throughout the dog's life. However, these medications will not eliminate existing infection. Knowing the heartworm infection status of your dog is an important part of keeping your dog healthy and fit.

What can be done if my dog has heartworms?

Medications to eliminate adult heartworms and immature heartworms are available. Once successfully treated, preventive medications and regular monitoring with the HESKA Solo Step CH Heartworm Test should become part of your dog's health maintenance plan.

The American Heartworm Society recommends annual heartworm testing for dogs and as indicated for cats in its 2014 Guidelines for the Diagnosis, Prevention and Management of Heartworm Infection. www.heartwormsociety.org

